

# DEATH MATCH



A  
MICK MICHAELS  
NOVEL



*Bob Roop*

This is mostly a work of fiction. Many of the settings exist and some of the events depicted actually occurred but have been altered to enhance the storyline. This story has no purpose other than to entertain the reader.

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## Introduction

**B**orn and bred a killer, Oki Azara relished dealing death. His father and father's father had been modern-day ninja, assassins for hire, and he had learned the lethal trade at an early age. Ten years old when he first went along on a contract killing, he had witnessed his father's expertise at murder seven times before he was twelve.

Following an especially notorious killing in Japan, the elder Azara had taken Oki with him to Hawaii to wait for the furor in their homeland to wane. Late one night, a drunken American marine wandered into an alley off Prostitute Lane in the Japanese sector of Honolulu. Oki Azara beat the man to death on a whim and savored the power he felt holding life and death over another human being in his hands. He was thirteen years old at the time. Now, twenty years later, he had killed many times, and women and children who had gotten in the way had also known his fatal brutality.

At four inches over six feet in height, he was uncommonly tall for a Japanese male. He weighed three hundred and thirty pounds and because he carried no fat on his heavily muscled body, his extraordinary bulk was unmatched anywhere in Japan. He could run at three-quarter speed for a mile, half-speed for ten, and walk for thirty-six hours with no rest.

He was expert at karate, kung fu, judo, kick boxing, wrestling, brawling, garrote, sword, knife and firearm, and very few men in the world could stand up to him one on one. He worked as a Japanese professional wrestler, but had no interest in the vocation as a career. It was merely a cover—his true-life work was murder. Like his forebears, he was an assassin for hire and had honed his skills until he was a killing machine.

Infamous for the death of Japan's greatest professional wrestler in a match with him a decade earlier, Oki Azara now kept his lethal abilities well hidden when he was in the ring. Avoiding the limelight, he wrestled at odd intervals and spent most of his time serving as front man, enforcer and assassin for the top criminal boss in Japan.

Oki Azara is *not* my kind of guy. My name is Mick Michaels and, until a few days ago, I spent most of my time helping youngsters become better athletes. I also taught them to respect themselves and one another, to demonstrate fair play and good citizenship, and to do their best at all times.

Under normal circumstances, my path would not cross that of a monster like Azara in three lifetimes, but these weren't normal times. A vicious criminal conspiracy menacing our country made it essential for me to become a professional wrestler and placed me directly in the killer's sights. A little more than twenty-four hours after I began my new career, in only my third professional match, I was facing my own assassin in a wrestling ring. The Yakuza mob boss sent Oki Azara to kill me!

## 1

"Stick that handshake in yer ear, you puke!" roared the raging giant, brutally whacking my hand aside. Already too close for comfort as he loomed over me, he juttied his murderous face to within an inch of mine and sent a shiver down my spine when he growled, "Yer not in the Olympics *now*!"

From the feeling my hand took on, the place I would be sticking it might be into a plaster cast. At the moment, that was the least of my worries. Offering me this snub was a professional wrestler named Tarzan, owner of three hundred muscular pounds packed onto a six and a half-foot frame. In addition to being humongous, he was also very convincing with his imitation of an out and out maniac, and I decided his insult was one I was going to ignore.

Massive of shoulder, chest and thigh, he foamed at the mouth as he glared at me with bloodshed in his eye. Not about to take *my* eyes off him, I studied the nasty scars strewn over the head and upper body of the brute. These marks of past violence looked directly connected to the boiling temper he made no effort to hide.

Shuffling from side to side, he moved around in front of me, as if he couldn't decide where to start with whatever mayhem he planned. I'd never laid eyes on this brute until thirty seconds ago and had no idea why he was so pushed out of shape, but saw he seemed convinced he could do anything he wanted to about it.

Here I was, Mick Michaels, at any moment needing to protect myself from, by Tarzan's look and manner, assault with a deadly wrestler, working undercover as a Secret Service agent on the lookout for funny money. I sure didn't see any on Tarzan and also detected nothing counterfeit in his appearance as a man about to go berserk.

Backing away a couple of steps, he pointed at me and took a wide-sweeping look at the spectators. "I'm gonna rip this punk's head off!" he thundered, looking insanely eager to commence ripping.

Tarzan showed no lack of confidence when he broadcast his game plan to everyone in the building. I scanned the densely packed fans sitting fifteen rows deep around the ring and saw no one challenge his claim; instead I noticed a number of them nodding in agreement. It seemed they were as convinced as he was of his ability to mutilate my essential body parts.

Standing six feet tall and weighing two hundred twenty pounds ranks me among the larger members of our species. I was skilled at amateur wrestling and the martial arts and normally felt big and tough enough to handle physical face-offs with anyone. Tarzan looked a foot taller and twice my size. Even so, I knew I could defend myself *except* for one small detail. I couldn't use my fighting skills!

If I used amateur wrestling moves to take Tarzan off his feet and control-ride him until he calmed down, I would never get another match or, if I did, it wouldn't be any time soon. I had been told this by almost everyone I'd come in contact with in this business. The man who trained me had been first to warn me, followed by the promoter who hired me and finally, by every wrestler in my dressing room. If I just wanted to be what they called a *shooter* and use amateur wrestling moves to control professional opponents, any match I was in, compared to what pro fans were used to seeing, would be extremely boring.

Boring matches turn fans away in droves, gate receipts plummet, and wrestlers and promoter suffer in their bank accounts. I was being given a chance to develop into a *professional* wrestler. If I wasn't willing to forego my amateur training and learn the ropes as any other apprentice would, I could return to the amateur ranks.

I had been given this advice over and over, even while making it clear I understood the conditions, was putting my amateur background on the shelf and moving on. I *was* vexed to learn these new colleagues deemed

my hard-earned status as Olympic Champion a negative and treated me with scorn because of it. I'd decided not to tell anyone I was also skilled in the martial arts, and knew, if I was going to succeed in my undercover work, I couldn't use those abilities either.

In amateur wrestling or martial arts matches, all I'd had to do was go out on the mat and use moves and techniques developed from many years of practice. I'd never worried about what onlookers were thinking; in many intense bouts, I had forgotten they were even there.

In this situation, it was the *audience* who would decide if what they saw was any good or not. With only four days of training in basic professional holds and moves under my belt, and no experience at showmanship, I had *no* idea how to have a *professional* wrestling match that would please or impress the fans. That was the main reason for my jitters although the possibility of being assaulted didn't help.

A savage hazing in the dressing room brought me to the ring in an uneasy frame of mind. When Tarzan made his scary arrival thirty seconds after mine, unease flared into outright alarm. Mainly worried about making a fool of myself during my first match, I hadn't anticipated the need to defend myself against a gigantic psycho.

Now, with me unable to use my fighting skills and the match about to start, lack of experience paired with no knowledge of what to expect were a nerve-rattling tag team busily putting a boot-stomping to my composure. Why hadn't I been warned about a nightmare like this in professional wrestling school?

Only twenty-four hours past my final class, I recalled no lessons mentioning violent mental cases as potential first foes. During four full days of intense training, my instructor, after lecturing me ad nauseam to forget my amateur skills, focused only on technique and constant drilling on the beginning holds and moves of the *pro* style. A skilled and patient teacher, he took great pains to teach me how to fall without suffering serious injury when knocked off my feet.

From the Gorgeous George era, the old pro grooming me learned *his* trade during a twenty-five year career as a masked man named "Doctor X." Photos lining the walls of his wrestling school gym showed him matched against many of the stars of his time. Shots of him being drop-kicked by a youthful Argentina Rocca, arm-dragging WWF World Champion Buddy Rogers, and being slammed by NWA World Champion Lou Thesz,



backed up his claim of having been, as he put it, one of “the boys.”

Yesterday, on the evening of day four, he gave me a brief “You’re ready” graduation speech. I asked him for pointers on showmanship; how to work it into the new style he taught me, and if there was anything else he thought I should know. That’s when he should have told me I might run into a mammoth madman and given me some tips on how to deal with the situation. Instead, the veteran merely smiled the smile of a man enjoying a private joke while he told me further study was offered only at “the school of hard knocks.” His parting words were one last reminder to “forget that amateur crap.”

“So, you wanna be a wrassler?” asked a nearby voice. “Well, boy, it’s now or never!” Moving to stand between Tarzan and me was another retired wrestler. His name was Jerry Meyers and he was the referee for tonight’s matches. With a straight arm jammed into the chest of the menacing giant to hold him back, he added, “Don’t sweat it. The worst he can do is kill you!”

The referee removed himself from the battle lines. Grinning at me, he dropped the straight arm, stepped back and signaled for the bell. I heard a dull clank, took a deep breath and moved forward to lock up with Tarzan. Aptly named, he instantly convinced me I had hold of someone strong enough to pal around with gorillas. He totally overpowered me, tying me up in such a way that the only attack option left was to kick him in the shin.

That move didn’t strike me as one that would make a good first impression on anyone, especially Tarzan. To meekly allow myself to be pushed into the ropes seemed equally unimpressive as an image-builder with the fans. Even though I dug in my heels and drove mightily against the visibly slaving titan, my resistance was slowly crumbled under the intense leverage he exerted, leaving me all too soon rope-backed.

“All right, Tarzan, kiss the boy and let him go,” said the referee. “He’s in the ropes.” Glowering dreadfully, Tarzan cautiously unclasped himself from me while the official poked him in the ribs a few times. “How’s yer wife getting along?” Jerry asked in a casual voice.

In light of my foe’s mental condition, falling just short of deranged, this seemed an odd time for social chitchat. Figuring the referee must be talking to me, I was about to tell him we could talk about it later, when Tarzan growled, “Happy as hell not to be freezing her ass off in Vancouver.”

His face still a vicious mask, the tone of his voice told me the outwardly raging Tarzan wasn't as mad as he looked. Feeling more at ease, I moved off the ropes into another lockup and, without a clue as to how, acquired a headlock on my opponent. When I tried to improve on this puzzling advantage, I made a surprising discovery.

Despite what it looked like to the fans, Tarzan was in total control of the situation. Though I clutched him around the head, with his blond crew-cut sticking up through my clasped arms, his left hand gripped my left wrist, blocking the exertion of any real pressure to his head or neck, but also holding my left arm snugly in place around them. At the same time, his right arm was clamped tightly around my waist, allowing him to hold me in place or move me around the ring at will. Basically, it was he, not me, who had him in my headlock.

Butterflies chased away the sinking feeling I had in my stomach when the match began, making me a bit more confident. Despite predictions of doom from the wrestlers in my dressing room, I was still disaster-free, standing in the center of the ring with a headlock of sorts on Tarzan. Baffled as to how or why I appeared to control this powerful man, I began to see merit in the theory that ignorance is bliss.

That I was even here seemed unreal. Five whirlwind days ago, I stood in my martial arts studio, fifteen hundred miles away. With no intention of leaving the area any time soon. I had been refusing employment from the very man I now worked for.

"Thank you for your offer, Mr. Luttrell," I replied. "Florida *would* be a nice place to live, but I'm just not interested in becoming a professional wrestler."

This was the fourth telephone call I'd received from a professional wrestling promoter wanting to know if I was interested in turning pro. I don't know much about his business, have nothing against the sport, but have too much on my plate and worked too hard and long toward my own goals to drop everything in order to do something else.

My amateur wrestling school, *Mick Michael's Academy*, is flourishing. It was doing only so-so before the Barcelona Olympics; my return from Spain with a gold medal in my pocket triggered heavy enrollment that remained steady even now, eighteen months after the Games.

Due to my own interest in the martial arts, six months ago I offered

classes in that discipline. I soon learned many of my wrestling students were, as I had been as a youngster, also keen on developing self-defense skills. Added enrollment of boys and girls attracted by martial arts training had happily forced me to expand the Academy.

I gave the promoter a cordial good-bye, hung up the telephone and looked at the spacious new studio around me. Mats covered the entire floor, with one mirrored wall and the other walls padded for sparring sessions. It was an ideal set-up to practice the disciplined movements of martial arts training.

I faced the mirrored wall and assumed a tae kwon do fighting stance. Looking back at me was a well-built young man with shaggy blond hair, blue eyes in a rugged face, with a small scar bisecting one eyebrow and a nose that looked like it had been broken once or twice. I'm six feet tall and still compete at my Olympic weight of two hundred and twenty pounds, top limit for light heavyweights in international amateur wrestling.

The Academy is not my only reason for wanting to remain in East Lansing. I grew up here, and most of my family members live in the area. Amateur wrestling has given me a chance to see what the rest of our country looks like, but I still find Michigan the most beautiful place in America.

In addition to family, I have many close friends here, one of them a sweet young lady who has become more than just a romantic interest. Her name is Janine and we have been dating one another since high school. Being away for two months of training camp, then five weeks of Olympic Games competition taught me I don't want any separation from her longer than a day or two.

I've hired advanced students as instructors to run the Academy several nights a week. On those evenings, I am learning the detecting business. I have a degree in Criminal Justice, but not time or desire to become a member of state or city police organizations. Instead, I am interning with a local detective agency. It is an interesting trade and a way to further my education. No, I'm not going into professional wrestling or anywhere else.

**T**hat was five days ago. Since that time, I have gone from part-time

private detective to full-time undercover agent for the U.S. Secret Service. It wasn't cheating husbands I was after now, but expert counterfeiters passing American dollars on a massive scale and committing vicious murders in the process.

"When are you jokers gonna quit playin' around and start kickin' butt?" asked a nasal, high-pitched voice from ringside.

On the heels of this lament came a few complaints of "boring" from the audience. I ignored them all. Ticking off Tarzan might create my own boredom while looking back on how badly I fumbled the only real chance *anyone* had, before it was too late, to track down the criminals posing a dire threat to our American way of life.

"Hey! Tarzan! Will you quit screwing around, kick that rookie's butt and get it over with, so we can see a *real* match?" came from the same high-pitched voice, followed by laughing and hoots from other members of the audience.

Pro wrestling fans were another new experience—much more vocal and demanding than those from my amateur days. During my brief walk to the ring, I'd heard a dizzying variety of loudly proposed tactics to use against my foe during the match. Ranging from a slap in the face to different forms of bloodletting, most of the suggested actions were, if done on the street, crimes calling for a prison term.

Seeing Tarzan's savage green eyes look me up and down for the first time, I'd been forced to wonder how handy *he* was at applying the horrifying moves I'd been urged to use on him. Happily, my foe's threats of ultra-violence had so far been just that, all talk and no action, and I felt my blood pressure begin to ease a little.

Any sense of well being was abruptly lost when Tarzan spun us both ninety degrees to the right, violently shoving me forward at the same time. Though he moved with me, and stayed in the headlock, I was totally off balance and in danger of falling on my face. Sticking out a foot to act as a brake, I clung desperately to his head.

I felt myself begin to go down and wondered if Tarzan had planned things this way all along. He had both my arms clamped, leaving no way for me to break my fall. Was *he* going to be the one doing the breaking, perhaps a few of my bones, by the simple act of falling on them with his massive body, then happily head home for a few beers to celebrate his short night's work?

In the next instant, Tarzan pulled me upright and suffered an attack of some sort. Bellowing like a bull in the grip of a castration team, he let go of me, shot out both arms and waved them wildly in the air. Startled, I almost let go of the headlock to see what had happened to him. The referee quickly stepped in, winked at me and loudly made an amazing inquiry. "Do you wanna give up?" he yelled urgently. "Give me the okay and I'll stop the match!"

With just the three of us in the ring, I figured Jerry *had* to be talking to my opponent, making me again want to step away from him to see what the problem was. Tarzan removed that option by re-clamping his thick right arm around my waist. At the same time, he waved his left arm up and down in some kind of semaphoric signal to Jerry, who crouched with an expectant look on his face, hand raised to signal for the bell, giving every indication he expected Tarzan to throw in the towel at any second.

Complaining of boredom only moments before, the fans energetically responded to whatever it was that had happened to my huge opponent. From all sides of the ring came cheers, whistles, applause, hoots, boos, and catcalls. I even heard a repeat of some earlier advice. "Tear off his stinking head and shit down his neck!" screeched a hate-filled voice.

Still crouched in front of me with arm raised, Jerry winked again and asked, "Whadda ya think, boy? Is that head buster you got on ol' Tarzan gonna make him give up?"

"Say *what*?" I asked.

"Why do ya think he was hollering like a stuck pig?" Jerry said with a sarcastic grin. "You got him so tight by the head, he's about to pass out!"

"Mind yer own business, Meyers," came from the area of my left armpit in a deep, familiar growl. "The puke's confused enough as it is."

While that assessment was a valid one, I saw the light about Tarzan's puzzling problem. What he had done was make it look to the fans like he tried to escape by shoving me away from him, but my headlock was so powerful he could not free himself. To the contrary, if he *hadn't* used his prodigious strength to hold me up, I would have taken a sprawling face-first flop onto the mat. This realization led to more confusion. Why did he want to make *me* look good to the fans?

"Will you *please* rip off his head and shit down his neck?" While appreciative of this indirect support, I soon learned that not *all* the fans rooted for the underdog good guy. "Come on, Tarz, tear out his gizzard

and hand it to him!” came from one of Tarzan’s fans.

An eerie thought arose from hearing such an extreme suggestion. While I was pretty sure this sort of thing was not allowed, *or* a normal strategy used by pro wrestlers, the reason it was being suggested to Tarzan might be because he had done it *before*.

I assumed even the savage Tarzan would not go to such lengths, put it out of my mind, and was proven right when my opponent ignored the gruesome advice. Fortunately for my frayed nervous condition, Tarzan’s admirers were in the minority and lacked the volume to be much of a factor in the match.

Even though for a hidden purpose, my move into the pro style had been intriguing to look forward to, but it had proven in one major way to be a letdown once I started training. My amateur wrestling abilities were not only of little use in pro wrestling, I was told not to use them at all! Though called by the same name, the two sports were as different as oranges and orangutans.

Amateur wrestling is nonstop action and allows no damaging holds or moves risking injury to either wrestler. Showboating is heavily frowned on, and matches even at grade school level have several officials to ensure safety and accurate scoring. I was leaving the code of that rigidly run sport to insert myself into a profession where flamboyance was a mainstay, with few rules to govern what went on. Even so, I had the chance to do a service for my country and, at the same time, pay back a brother I owed everything I had achieved. I intended to do both, whatever it took.

“Tear his stinking head off and shit down his filthy neck!” was heard again. The unusual nature of the request, paired with the venom-laden voice making it, drew my attention to its source. I looked to my left and saw an obese woman, overflowing a pair of ringside seats, wearing what appeared to be a chartreuse tent. She accompanied her command with twisting motions of her hands, showing me the method she wanted used for the head removal. My inspection of her ended when Tarzan decided he wasn’t going to give up from our headlock and cut short my decapitation lesson by steering me into the ropes facing the large woman’s seats.

“Taking yer lunch break so soon, boy?” Jerry asked, sternly eyeing me as he patted me on the shoulder and went on, “Why don’tcha let go of the hold while yer at it?” Before I could tell Jerry he was talking to the wrong person about any hold alteration, Tarzan demonstrated my mute

point when he simply let go, then shoved me roughly away from him.

"You *better* shut yer big hole!" he roared. Bellowed in a deep, growling voice, the warning blasted my eardrums and must have been heard everywhere in the building. I winced at the crude command, whirling around to find Tarzan had directed his threat to the corpulent woman seeking his head. She was quick with a reply. "Screw you, you jackoff!" she screamed, punctuating her order with two raised middle fingers.

Following fast on the heels of Tarzan's blast, her message said she wasn't shutting anything. The audience facing Tarzan appeared stunned by the *big hole* outburst, each member possibly thinking the massive wrestler had spoken to them personally. As a result, with the small armory fairly quiet, it seemed a certainty that people a block away heard Tarzan when he retorted, "I *would* jack off for the rest of my life before I'd touch a fat cow like you!" boomed the irate wrestler.

Quivering with rage as he delivered this crushing message, Tarzan glared at the woman with fire in his eyes. I wondered if it was something personal between them, or if he was just really turned off by overweight women. The gross ringsider quickly brought me out of my reverie. Also easily heard, her reply signaled that she was anything but crushed. "With your equipment, you needledick," she brayed, "how could you even find it?"

The spectators erupted, the men with guffaws and horselaughs, and the women with high-pitched shrieks and squeals. The front row of ring-side seats was situated about eight feet from the ring, leaving Tarzan only a short distance to go as, face flushed scarlet, he stepped through the ropes to confront his slanderer. With a concerned look on his face, the referee moved in and blocked Tarzan's exit from the ring.

"Looky here, Tarzan," said Jerry, in a scolding voice. "If yer mother's gonna talk dirty like that, yer gonna have to quit bringing her to the matches."

Turning his back to the fans on that side of the ring, Tarzan quickly covered his mouth to conceal the grin I saw there. I had no way to hide my reaction, and pent-up nervous tension, triggered by Jerry's outrageous remark, produced a bark of laughter that threatened to become uncontrollable. My opponent instantly squashed the threat. In a voice that sounded like he was gargling ball bearings, he said, "What the fuck *you* laughin' at, asshole?"

Tarzan glared at me with the same ferocious expression he'd worn when the match began, while Jerry showed his disapproval with raised

eyebrows atop a look of stern rectitude. It was amazing how quickly un-amused I became under their dual scrutiny. Tarzan forgot about the emasculating woman at ringside. Backing to center ring, he raised two big fists while informing me my options were limited. "You can run, dickhead," he rumbled, "but you *can't* hide!"

I turned to Jerry for an explanation. "What the hell is *his* problem?" I asked, unable to keep the nervousness out of my voice. Jerry replied with the look and tone of a man reluctantly talking to the village idiot. "Well, it's pretty simple," he drawled. "If Tarzan goes out there and smacks that fat woman, she'll sue his ass off. *You* now," he continued, "he can stomp the shit out of all night long, without it costing him a dime."

He smiled patiently after dropping this logical bombshell and, even with Tarzan waiting to use me as his whipping boy, the thought that I was going to like Jerry popped into my head. He had a twinkle of good humor in his faded blue eyes, with laugh lines in the right places on his craggy face. Though one of my dressing room morale mashers, he was light-years friendlier than his fellow put-down artists.

"Tear that jackoff's head off and shit down his filthy neck!" croaked the chunky cheerleader at ringside.

I saw the problem of how to deal with Tarzan wasn't going to go away, removing any choice other than to go out to center ring and face him. I didn't set any speed records getting there, but didn't have far to go and soon reached striking distance. Having thus far shown no sign of being a time-waster, my huge foe remained true to form by immediately cranking back his leg-sized right arm to launch a roundhouse punch.

It was instantly clear his fist, if allowed to travel a full one hundred and eighty degrees unobstructed, would crash violently into the intended target, represented unwillingly by *my* head. There actually was enough time to reflect on the physical aspects of the offensive move, with plenty left over to consider the proper defense.

In the end, swayed by Hollywood and a misguided notion of what the *good guy* in the match should do, I felt my only choice was to block the punch. Images of movie heroes doing the same thing flickered through my head as I waited until the very last instant to swiftly fling up my left arm. Just as quickly, I pulled it back down, with the bones involved possibly rearranged into three or four new sections from the meeting with Tarzan's thick forearm.



A strangled squawk, extremely *non-heroic* as movie script or any other kind of non-bird communication, burst from me as numbness spread from impact point to shoulder and fingertips. I knew Tarzan would now be infuriated and, with me partially disabled, that this would be an excellent time for him to launch an offensive. Needing some recovery time, I had to hope he was feeling some of the angst I felt. He was.

“Goddamn, son-of-a filthy, rotten, whore mongering, *bitch!*” whooped Tarzan. “No good, ignorant, shit for brains, mindless *motherfucker!*”

Luckily for me, Tarzan was of a defensive mind when in pain and I didn’t come under attack. Even so, as he vacated any claim to being the strong *and* silent type, he loudly proved me correct about the infuriated part. With the width of the ring between us, we must have looked like movable bookends, both of us clutching one arm while doing that age-old dance, the hurting one-step.

“Tear off his ugly head now, while he’s hurt!” shrieked the obese woman. Though Big Bertha got high marks for persistence, she needed to review her notes concerning originality.

Jerry walked over to me with an indignant look on his face. “Jayzus H. Keerist!” he said. “Did them amachure folks teach you that ignorant damn move?”

Indignation seemed the proper tone to use while going on with the conversation. “Maybe you think I should have blocked it with my *head?*” I hotly replied. Jerry speed-shifted into ridicule. “Hey dumbass!” he said, in an insulted tone. “Didn’t you ever hear of *ducking* a punch? The man give you enough time to duck that one, you could have took a nap first!”

Rebuked by the crusty veteran, I turned to Tarzan, who had an eerie look to him. Over the worst of his pain, he no longer danced or rubbed his arm. He merely stood across the ring looking at me with a seething intensity that held all of his former hostility, but also a new element.

I hoped I was seeing caution at work. If Tarzan thought pain for me also meant pain for him, as in our most recent clash of arms; he might be easier to deal with. A classic example of this strategy is the guy with black eyes, broken nose and missing teeth, who won the fight by using his face to break the other guy’s fist.

Jerry finished his examination of my wounded arm and diagnosed only minor damage. “There ain’t a damn thing wrong with you!” he said. “I been hurt worse picking my nose, fer God’s sake!” Having given medical

clearance to go on, he promoted an attempt for improved skill levels by sadly shaking his grizzled head before saying, "This is about the most fucked-up abortion of a horse shit match I've seen in thirty-some years in the business!"

These tender mercies received, I returned to the firing line to find Tarzan gone. Removed to the far ring apron, he was trying to become better acquainted with one of the spectators. "Hey! You! Buzzard-neck!" he gargled, sneering at the object of his attention. "Is that yer wife yer hanging on to, or did they let you bring a baboon in with you?"

Tarzan was on the opposite side of the ring from Big Bertha, but she noticed his chatty mood and hurriedly waddled over to pick up where they'd left off. As she jiggled around the corner post nearest him, Tarzan spotted her imminent arrival. Recoiling, he hawked deeply and took aim before launching an impressive amount of semi-liquid material at the charging woman.

At first, his missile array looked as if it would fall short and miss her entirely. Having a moving target saved it. Big Bertha's speed and weight combined to produce too much forward momentum. Unable to put on the brakes, she trundled right onto ground zero and took a direct hit.

Jerry studied my opponent with an analyzing eye. "Look at ol' Tarzan over there," he said, sounding peeved. "You got him acting like a man with one thumb in his mouth and the other in his ass, waiting for somebody to yell '*switch!*'"

All I had seen Tarzan act was mad, so I asked, "Jerry, what the hell are you talking about?"

Laying a gnarled finger alongside his nose, he issued judgment. "I think you got him scared," he said, seeming quite serious.

It was my turn to scoff. "Oh, yeah! Right! Why didn't I think of that?" I said. "I could see the guy had a yellow streak the first time I laid eyes on him!"

Jerry's face again grew somber. "Smart-ass don't sit well on hardly nobody, boy," he said with a frown. "If you're serious about getting in the business, you might want to remember that. Tarzan ain't all that worried about you *trying* to mess him up," he went on in a wry tone, "but yer green, nervous and clumsy, and them three put together *can* get a man hurt!"

If I understood Jerry right, Tarzan's hesitation to come to grips

was not going to create awestruck terror of me in the profession. My talent didn't scare him; it was my lack of ability that had him worried. While he thought there was a good chance I was going to injure him, he felt it was going to be more by accident than by any design on my part.

I felt a little insulted, but also relieved. "Tell him I'll just wrestle him," I said, "and try not to hurt him, if he'll do the same."

Jerry adopted the look of a man discovering a dozen squirming maggots in his half-eaten salad. "What a waste!" he said. "All them years in school just to become a college-educated idiot. I got a tree stump in my back yard smarter than you!"

Disgusted analysis given, Jerry used his hand as a handkerchief, loudly honking into it before wiping the spent ammunition on the bottom of his raised boot. An education *about* education was being forced on me. A college graduate, I stood here looking at a man who seemed to have gone no further in academia than eighth grade. As I was clearly student to his professor, I realized it was the *classroom* one was in that assigned rank. "Hey man, clue me in," I asked. "What did I say?"

Jerry was still concerned with my wasted tuition fees. "If brains was made out of dynamite," he said, sounding very sure of his thesis, "you wouldn't have enough to blow yer nose!" Softening, he apparently felt sympathy for a rookie's ignorance. "He ain't *tried* to hurt you yet, has he, boy?" he asked patiently, as if talking to a small child. "*The business* ain't about hurtin' people!"

What Jerry meant wasn't clear, but I had to agree with what he said. Though Tarzan looked and felt like he could, *even* if I used my fighting skills, put some hurt on me, the only pain I'd suffered in the match had been of my own doing.

"Well, we done screwed around long enough," Jerry sighed, going on in a snappy tone. "Let's get cracking!"

We turned toward Tarzan and found him still on the apron, deep into a strange dialogue with Big Bertha. She used a wide range of obscene terms to passionately describe his looks and family tree. He validated her earlier opinion about his sexual habits by moving a huge fist back and forth in front of his crotch, pantomiming a sex act, usually not performed in front of a live audience, that was said to grow hair on one's palms.

"Calm yerself down, lover boy. The honeymoon's over," Jerry said

with a grin. "Say goodbye to your sweetie and get back to work." As he maneuvered Tarzan back into the ring, Jerry kept a cautious eye on the frothing Bertha. Almost raving, she looked mad enough to lunge under the bottom rope and bite the nearest ankle.

While it was the same violent-acting and vicious-looking Tarzan waiting to resume hostilities, I grew more excited than nervous as Jerry's advice sank in. Difficult as it was to trust someone as menacing as my opponent, I saw him in a new context. Along with his savage attitude, he showed rare speed and agility for such a big man. If I could block out his berserker image and focus on him solely as an athlete, I might be able to get through the match and learn something as well. Since it was vital that I do both, I decided to relax a little and see what happened.

Tarzan moved forward to apply simple arm bars and hammer locks. Allowing me to struggle out of them, he moved into holds harder to escape. By using his position as a hint toward reversing a hold and leaving only one avenue open to do so, the mountainous wrestler forced a lesson in counter-wrestling on me. He made it a tough contest, using up much of the stamina I had brought into the match, but he didn't make a liar out of Jerry by assaulting me.

He *did* stun me with two hammering forearm smashes across the chest. Both smacked into me with a loud thud, knocking the breath out of me and hurtling me backward into the ropes. More intimidating than painful, their effect soon wore off. While I was learning to trust Tarzan, I piled up minor injuries from another source, the wrestling ring.

About eighteen feet a side, with ropes at knee, hip, and chest level, it was soon revealed as a booby trap. When Tarzan escaped from another of my gained-without-a-clue holds by simply picking me up and slamming me, I got the two-for-one special. Not enough padding on top of, or give beneath, the hard ring boards, bruised me from shoulder to hip and I had patches of skin scraped off both elbows from contact with the rough canvas mat cover.

Tarzan paced the moves and countermoves to spark the fan's excitement. He drew cheers for me, after periods of suspenseful sparring, by the simple move of backing away. Shaking his head in frustration, he frowned at me, giving the impression I had stymied his plans. Since all I had done was wait for *him* to do something and then react to his move, it surprised me to have the fans respond to his non-moves as if I'd done

something dazzling.

The audience reaction to my foe's thwarted purpose was strange. Only Tarzan knew what he was planning, any schemes he might be hatching could only be guessed at and speculated upon by the fans. It seemed they automatically assumed any design even *thought* about by Tarzan was a sinister, dastardly one, and his obvious regret at not being able to carry them out drew intense dislike for him. In effect, every time my foe stood around looking frustrated, the fans saluted me and reviled him.

"Rip off his arm and beat in his stinking head with it!" croaked a voice clogged with fury. Big Bertha fanatically savored the return to action, keeping up a steady demand for me to do something negative to Tarzan's head. Maybe she had figured out I wasn't going to try to remove even a molecule's worth and was hoping I would be more agreeable to merely pounding on it. She was out of luck there too.

"Let go before I bite yer nuts off!" growled Tarzan, sounding like he was gargling broken glass this time. The lesson seemed to be over. Moments before, clasped in Tarzan's powerful bear hug, I tried to loosen his grip by grabbing a handful of hair. Now, my mind *and* body shrank from the painful image drawn by his threat, and I reacted as if I'd just discovered his head was on fire.

Without bothering to release the bear hug and put me down, he shifted his hands and effortlessly pressed me over his head. Admiration for his strength tried to take the top spot in my thoughts, but was roughly shouldered aside by what it was going to feel like being slammed to the canvas from ten feet up.

It looked like I was going to have to wait to find out. Instead of slamming me, Tarzan lurched around the ring, easily holding me high overhead. His huge left arm supported my upper body and I mustered all the offense I could come up with by snatching it in a death grip. As he continued to circle the ring, I wondered if he just couldn't make up his mind what to do with me.

He chose to seek direct audience participation in the decision and leaned against the ropes on one side of the ring. Addressing the awed fans with his usual volume, he asked their opinion of my performance to this point. "What do you think of this piece of shit *now*?" he bellowed, not sounding all that impressed with me.

Under the intense scrutiny of the puzzled fans, many of them looking

like they thought it was a trick question, I tried to put on the same impassive face I wore at the Olympics when I went out to wrestle the Russian. That guy was scary too, but I didn't want him to know I thought so.

"You *like* this Olympic jackoff?" angrily roared my foe. "You can *have* him!" Maybe Tarzan decided a panicky look on my face would better suit him, because that's what he got when he threatened to throw me headfirst into the audience. By all logical standards, the upcoming twenty-foot flight and crash landing should have been the only thing I had on my mind.

Uneasily lobbying for equal billing was the paranoid suspicion Tarzan might use me as a means to crush the unending torrent of abuse being hurled at him. Grossly sprawled across several seats, *directly* in my flight path, was the toxic Big Bertha! Like a ruptured sewer line, she spewed vile curses, obscene gestures and wave after wave of malice.

Given the choice of being dropped into her lap or taking a beating from Tarzan, I was leaning toward the beating. While she looked large and soft enough to absorb the impact of a small airplane, her raging antics gave me the impression that landing in her embrace would feel like being hurled into a threshing machine.

I noticed energetic movement and saw that many of the other spectators eligible to be squashed were turning down the chance to meet me face to face. As another sign of the regard held for my foe's power, fans as far back as the tenth row of seats frantically waved their arms and shook their heads in chicken-hearted haste to turn down his offer to fly me in for a visit.

"I dare ya to throw him over here!" yelled a distant voice. Followed by several other voices, their owners also well away from any possible crash site, this one urged Tarzan to make good his threat. They carried the same tone as those morbid observers urging suicidal leapers to "go ahead and jump."

Evidently preferring uncrushed safety to loyalty requiring a hospital stay, enough of the fans disowned me to reassure Tarzan that any post-match popularity polls were not already settled. Much to my relief, he contented himself with merely another lurch around the ring, possibly using me to condition himself for more strenuous future clashes. Lap two was just ending when Jerry made a suggestion. "Damn, Tarzan! Why don't you drop the boy?" he said peevishly. "Yer giving me a sore neck!"

With my sole choice as next move being forced obedience to the law of gravity, it was hard for me to sympathize with Jerry's growing cervical distress. However, not unlike root canal work, this first press slam would be better once ended, making me grateful when Tarzan agreed to the proposal.

Moving to center ring, he dropped the arm supporting my upper body, waited until I was head down and turning, then stepped out from underneath. Governed by the laws of physics, the plunge downward was painless. The flat on my back impact, ruled more by the law of the sudden stop, left me breathless.

While lying there doing fish out of water impressions, I wondered when Tarzan would grow tired of all this and end the match. The answer was given when he reached down, wrapped a big hand around my weakly flapping wrist, hauled me to my feet and, in the same motion, onto his shoulders.

As he began to rotate, moving counter-clockwise at a rapidly growing speed, I felt the lion's share of my bodily fluids trying to move into the inadequate space provided by far flung hands and feet. I tried to think of some way to counter or escape the move, but his Airplane Spin quickly rendered me too dizzy to come up with anything.

Tarzan unceremoniously dumped me off his shoulders, securing a position for me flat on the mat. Blearily watching the overhead lights spin, I lay there waiting for the finishing touches to this fantastic affair. I didn't care about losing; this was not to be a career for me. A performance good enough to earn me future matches had been all I hoped for when this match began, and I felt I had accomplished that goal.

When five seconds passed, with Tarzan nowhere to be seen, I took a dizzy peek around the ring. Locating him in the final stages of a staggering reel, I watched as he lost his balance and stumbled off toward a distant corner. Picking up speed at an incredible rate, he crashed *headfirst* into the tum buckle, the collision moving the entire ring several inches.

It also arrested Tarzan's forward motion, bouncing him, staggering now in reverse, back toward *my* helpless position. Though earlier fears of being crushed resurfaced, my head was still spinning, making it hard to get a re-location message to my body. With rising alarm, I watched Tarzan fill the horizon with looming disaster.

He shuffled to a halt, swaying unsteadily back and forth, from my

angle looking much like a nearly toppled giant redwood. I was mustering up all the energy I had left to try and roll away from him, when he fell. He hurtled down, blocking out the light with his huge body, landing with a crashing impact that raised me two inches off the canvas and a cloud of dust even higher.

Lying scant inches away, appearing to be comatose, Tarzan had somehow reached my level of competition. The openings created by this new situation grew clearer when Jerry got down on one knee alongside me and made an observation. "Don't he look peaceful laying there?" he asked tenderly, going on to add, "Why don't you jump on top of him, while you got the chance?"

The way I was feeling, the ring could have burst into flames and not produced a jump from me guaranteed to clear a toothpick. Even so, all I had to do was roll over and flop an arm across Tarzan while Jerry counted him down. At the three count, the ring bell clanked, launching a wave of victorious pleasure across the small armory.

As the noise from the crowd became deafening, Jerry quickly man-handled me to my feet. Steadying me with one hand, he raised my arm in victory with the other and made another suggestion. "Ol' Tarzan there likely don't want to see your pretty face around here when he wakes up." Jerry turned me to face my exit route and went on, "Why don't you make like a cow patty and hit the trail?" Feeling steady enough to follow his very sound advice, I wobbled toward the corner that pointed back to my dressing room.

"I'll give you a hundred bucks if you kick his head in!" hissed a familiar voice. A passing glance at Tarzan's pal, the obese Big Bertha, showed her nearing total lunacy. Trying to worm her way under the bottom rope to attack the fallen wrestler, she had a wad of bills clutched in one grimy hand. Her offer could have been raised ten times and remained of no interest.

Tarzan showed increased signs of life and I was provided with all the incentive I needed. Discretion took a starring role and moved me quickly out of the ring, valor making only a cameo appearance with a hastily contrived, mock-heroic expression replacing the addled look on my face as I cravenly escaped from my first victory.



Ten days earlier, Hataki Chango sat in his office high above Tokyo and felt his hatred grow until it was a raging fire around the cold heart inside him. His plan to financially cripple the United States of America would allow him to exact his revenge by destroying them as a world power. Known throughout his country as a hugely successful businessman, he hid his real position known only by *one* other, as top boss in the underworld of Japan. The billions he reaped while looting the country he despised would make him the most powerful criminal leader anywhere.

Chango heard the soft chime of his desk clock and turned away from his view of the Ginza. It was the day of Phase One. In major cities of Europe, Asia and Africa, men would soon be moving out to implement his plan. Three days from now, the hated United States would begin to *feel* his wrath. He now had work to do on Phase Two.

He opened a drawer in his desk and flipped a switch to activate the security system. As the screen built into his desktop came alive, he saw the American wrestler was, as he had arranged, alone in the elevator. In the five seconds before he switched off the screen, he saw the man was clearly on edge. Very soon he will be a great deal more than just worried, Chango told himself.

He pushed an intercom button. "Yoku, when the gentleman arrives, show him into my office."

He pushed another button. "Oki. Five minutes."

The American took two steps into the office, watched the door close quietly behind him, then stopped when he turned and saw Chango. "Where's Oki?" he asked.

Chango remained seated. "He will be here shortly, Mr. Fuller," he said. "You don't mind if I call you by your given name, do you?"

Frowning, the wrestler flexed his torso, his muscular upper body covered only by a tight T-shirt, stepped closer to Chango and eyed the impeccably dressed Japanese sitting behind the desk. White-haired, the man was small and looked frail. He stared back at the American with a cordial smile on his face.

"Yeah, I *do* mind!" replied Fuller. "Who the hell *are* you?"

"I will let Oki introduce us, Mr. Fuller," Chango said.

"How do you know my real name, anyway?" growled Fuller. "I don't

know you, or remember ever seeing you before.”

Chango opened a drawer in his expansive teak desk, took out a passport and showed it to the glowering wrestler. “In your profession, Mr. Fuller, many lies are told to ensure profits are gained. In most cases, the bigger the lie, the greater the profit. However,” as he went on, Chango opened the slender booklet and turned it toward the American, “official documents are usually reliable sources of information.”

Fuller glared at the picture Chango held before him. “How did you get my passport?” he barked. “The wrestling company is supposed to be holding it for safekeeping until my tour is over!” Chango heard an undercurrent of fear in the angry voice and was pleased.

“Chango-san *owns* the wrestling company.”

Whirling to face a man of extraordinary width and thickness standing in front of the closed office door, Fuller was happy to see the huge Japanese wrestler, Oki Azara, who had been so friendly to him. Well above six feet tall, the man had a massive upper body, heavily muscled limbs, and a thick neck that sloped down to shoulders wider than the door behind him. Closely cropped, his black hair topped a simian face, with dark, reptilian eyes that now held nothing but menace.

“Oki! Didn’t hear you come in. Man, it’s good to see ya!” Fuller gushed, relief in his voice. “Maybe you can tell me what’s going on, bro. I came up here like you told me to, expecting to see you, and found *this* dude who won’t tell me who he is, plus he’s got my damn passport!”

In the silence following his outburst, Fuller looked from Oki back to Chango, then back to Oki. A second look at the impassive face of the Japanese wrestler coldly regarding him produced a nervous tremor in his voice when he stepped toward Oki and asked, “Hey bro, what’s the problem?”

Met again with stony silence, Fuller spread his hands in a pleading gesture and went on, in a shaky voice, “Did I hear you say Chango-san, is that this guy, owns the wrestling company, Oki? Is that what you said?”

“Chango-san!” snarled Oki.

“Okay, I’m s-s-sorry, Chango-san,” Fuller stammered at Chango before turning back to Oki. “Does he own the wrestling company? I thought Ashimi Beer owned the wrestling company.”

“Instead of inquiring about *my* position, Mr. Fuller,” asked Chango in a quiet voice, “don’t you think you should be more concerned with your

own financial situation?"

"Huh?" blurted the American wrestler, sounding close to panic. "Whadda ya mean, *my* financial situation?"

Chango reached into the same drawer he had taken the passport from and brought out a small ledger. Opening it, he ran a finger down a row of numbers, tapped the bottom figure a few times then said, "I have your signed markers for fifty thousand American dollars. You may look at the figures I have listed here, but I think you know what you owe me."

Fuller rushed up to the desk, placed both hands on it and jutted his face toward Chango. "Owe *you*?" he shouted. "I don't owe *you* shit! I borrowed the money from Oki! Owww!"

Fuller felt himself clenched by the neck from behind, lifted off his feet, pulled backward and roughly deposited into the easy chair in front of Chango's desk. Rubbing his neck, he looked around to see Oki now standing directly behind the chair, fists clenched and murder in his eye. "Damn, Oki," quavered Fuller. "What the hell did you do that for?"

"As you can see, Mr. Fuller," Chango said, "Oki works for me. It was my money you borrowed and gambled away. Your tour concludes tonight; I expect full repayment of my loan to you before you leave Japan."

"Aw, man," whined Fuller. "Oki never said anything about when I had to pay him back. This isn't fair."

"Did you inquire of Oki the exact terms of the loan you received, Mr. Fuller?"

"Well, uh, no, but....," stammered Fuller.

"Then any unfairness," Chango interrupted, "is of your own doing. You are naive, Mr. Fuller, to think you can borrow such a large sum of money, with no collateral, lose it playing high stakes poker, then go back to your country with no repercussions. Very naive!"

"Uh, I can give you some of my wrestling payoff," Fuller said, a defeated note in his voice.

"You have already spent *all* of your payoff, Mr. Fuller," said Chango. "The first ten thousand Oki advanced you was your own money."

Reaching into his desk drawer, Chango took from it a sheaf of papers and laid it on the desk. Clipped to the front sheet was a small slip with numbers and a signature on it. "This is your contract, Mr. Fuller." Chango removed the paper clip, and held up the slip of paper. "This is your marker for ten thousand American dollars." Turning to the last page of the con-

tract, Chango placed it on the desk facing Fuller, then slid his pen set next to it. "You will sign your contract receipt, acknowledging you have been paid, and I will return to you this marker."

"Man, you gotta give me a break," moaned Fuller. "I can't go back to the States without a dime. My wife has already spent some of that money!"

"You ask me for leniency, Mr. Fuller," Chango said, "yet you have tried to cheat me. Why should I help you?"

"Whadda ya mean, cheat you?" blurted Fuller.

"Foolish you may be, Mr. Fuller," Chango said, "but I feel confident you came here today knowing you had borrowed, not fifty, but *sixty* thousand dollars, didn't you?" When Fuller said nothing, Chango went on, "When I told you your debt was only fifty thousand dollars, Mr. Fuller, why did you not correct me? An honest man would have, don't you think?"

"Aw, man!" whined Fuller. "You gonna tell me you wouldn't grab at a chance to make ten grand? Anybody would, man, anybody would!"

Chango regarded the American wrestler for a few seconds, then replied, "You have a point, Mr. Fuller. You do have a point. Even so, when I *grab* at the chance, as you phrase it, to obtain money that is not rightfully mine, it is for a great deal more than the few dollars you sought to cheat me out of."

As Fuller took in what Chango said, he sat up and leaned forward. "Can we work something out?" he asked, a hopeful note in his voice.

Chango stared at him for half a minute, a considering look on his face. "Perhaps we can, Mr. Fuller," he said. "It depends on how cooperative you choose to be." He reached into his desk drawer, flipped a switch and sat back in his chair. "Before we continue, I want to show you something."

As he spoke, a panel slid open inside the office wall, revealing a large TV screen. Fuller turned to face it and saw the blank screen brighten. Within seconds, he rose from the chair, his face red and angry. Oki moved forward and reached for him, but Chango made a signal and the huge man paused. Fuller moved slowly toward the screen, pointing a shaking finger at it. "Man, that's me and Kito!" he hissed. "How the hell did you film us in my own hotel room?"

Chango flipped a switch and the screen went blank. "Would you like to sit down, Mr. Fuller?" he asked. "Or shall I ask Oki to assist you?"

Fuller turned around, eyed the menacing Oki, then moved back to the easy chair and sat down. As he opened his mouth to speak, Chango held up a hand. "I am a busy man, Mr. Fuller, and we have spent enough time on this matter. I will tell you your options. Kito is not Kito, but Sami. She is fourteen. You were seen taking her to your hotel room on many of the nights you spent in Tokyo. Your sexual exploitation of the child will have you in a Japanese prison for many years."

Chango tapped the ledger as he went on, "In addition, you owe me fifty thousand dollars, an amount, due to your penchant for gambling away your considerable earnings, I have learned you do not possess. Even so, American courts honor judgments made by foreign courts against American citizens in many foreign lands. *Japan* is one of them."

Chango pointed at Fuller as he continued, "Under Japanese law, I can collect what is owed me by seizing your home, your automobiles, anything you own, meaning your wife and children will be dispossessed while you are in a foreign prison, unable to help them. To use an American expression, Mr. Fuller, you are between a rock and a hard place!"

In the lengthy silence following Chango's oration, a white-faced Fuller fidgeted and squirmed, looking from side to side as if for some avenue of escape. Swallowing, he licked his lips and said, "You said options. That means I get to choose something. What's the other choice?"

Chango made a wiping motion with his hand. "Your other choice, Mr. Fuller, is to have all of your problems disappear. Instead of being interned in a Japanese prison, you can return to America. I will give you the payoff you earned for the tour and forgive your debt to me."

Fuller sat forward in the easy chair as Chango went on, "I will give you a contract for twice what you made on this tour and bring you back four times a year, each time raising your payoff. I will make you a top draw in Japan and also advance your career in the United States. All this I can easily do for you."

In a voice choked with relief, Fuller asked, "What do I have to do?"

"A very simple task, Mr. Fuller," said Chango. "I want you to take something back to your country for me and deliver it into the hands of an associate of mine."

"Where do you want it delivered?" Fuller asked in a shaky voice.

"Miami, Florida."

"Miami?" said Fuller, sitting up in his chair. "Man, I flew through Mi-

ami on my way over here. It didn't make a damn bit of sense to go that far out of my way to get to Los Angeles."

"I paid for your airline ticket, Mr. Fuller. Please let *me* worry about what makes sense. *Will* you do this task for me?"

The color returning to his face, Fuller shook his head like he was coming out of a bad dream. "I'll do it, man," he said. "Is it drugs or something like that?"

Chango rose and went to the TV screen, opened the drawer below it, took out a cassette and slid it into the video recorder built into the set. As he moved back to his desk, he said, "Before you ask any more questions, Mr. Fuller, I wish to convey to you the gravity of your situation."

On the screen appeared the image of two men fighting, both of them huge. They battled inside a dirt-floored circular enclosure with the camera shooting down at them. As one man made a series of karate kicks and thrusts, his extraordinary physique was impossible to miss and, even before his face came into view, Fuller knew it was Oki Azara.

For several minutes Fuller watched with growing awe the skill of Azara and his opponent. Both men used martial arts, boxing, wrestling, and street-fighting techniques and were bruised and bleeding from the heavy thumps and blows he heard, each man handing out and taking a ferocious beating.

Chango touched a console button and the action paused. "In your country, Mr. Fuller," Chango said, "certain elements of your society wish to witness a special kind of competition. Fighting roosters and dogs are bred and trained to fight *to the death*. In Japan," Chango went on, "members of *our* society who still honor Bushido, the Samurai Code, also desire to witness an extraordinary type of competition. What you have seen is very secret and I think what you see next will enable you to honor that secrecy."

He touched the button again. As the action on the screen resumed, Azara feinted a leg sweep. When his opponent lowered both arms to block it, Azara speared him in the throat with a vicious karate thrust. Blood gushing from his mouth and nose, the fallen fighter writhed on the ground for a few seconds, then somehow rose and stood teetering on his feet.

Azara took two quick steps toward him, jumped into the air and spun full circle, catching his stricken foe on the side of the head with the heel of

his foot. Fuller heard a sickening crack and saw the man's head bent at an impossible angle as he collapsed. Looking directly at the camera, Azara moved to stand over the fallen man's head. Grinning sadistically, he drew his right knee up to his chest.

The camera zoomed in on Azara's face and Fuller could see the frenzied bloodlust blazing in his eyes. The camera panned down the huge killer's body until it held a close-up shot of his fallen foe's head. Fuller recoiled in horror as he watched Oki Azara's rigid heel smash into the middle of the man's face with explosive impact, crushing his skull and splashing thick gouts of blood to all sides. The screen went blank.

"Our special competition is *also* to the death, Mr. Fuller. What you have witnessed was Oki's fifth opportunity to honor the twelve generations of samurai in his ancestry."

A tremor back in his voice, Fuller asked, "What's that got to do with me?"

For the first time, Chango dropped the genial smile he had kept on his face since the American wrestler entered his office. It was with eyes cold and fierce in a face of utter cruelty that he spoke next, "You will *not* ask questions! You will *not* become curious about what you are doing! You will not reveal, to *anyone*, a word of what occurred here today, or what you are being asked to do. If you do," he hissed at the cringing wrestler, "I will send Oki Azara to very cruelly end your life. Then I will ensure the tape of you sexually abusing a Japanese child is made public in your home community, before collecting from your estate the money you owe me. Do you understand me?"

"Yeah, man," said Fuller. "I get it, I won't say a word."

"Yes, *Sir, Mr. Chango!*" seethed Chango.

"Yes, *Sir, Mr. Chango. Yes, Sir!*" blurted Fuller.

"We *have* an arrangement! *Get out!*"

A minute later, Chango used the security monitor to watch Fuller ride down on the elevator, a look of fear still on his face. "Good work," Chango said to his huge henchman. "Submit your expenses for the prostitute and the poker players to Yoku."

"Okay, boss," said Azara. "What an easy mark this guy Fuller turned out to be. Finding out on his last tour that he had a gambling problem made him easy to set up when we brought him back for this one. In the dressing room I let him overhear me talking about an easy game I was

playing in every night and how I was cleaning up. He bit and we had him! We let him win a few grand at poker, then raised the stakes and cleaned him out. He kept coming back for more and I loaned the mark his own money over and over again. We only needed four sessions for Hata and his crew to take the sixty grand off him. To get him on tape, all I had to do was have the hooker knock on his hotel room door. What an idiot.”

“A useful idiot,” said Chango. “Flying him through Miami allowed Mura to put the final shipment of paper in with his baggage. We collected all his baggage for him when he arrived here, and removed our goods before returning it to him. He isn’t even aware of how we have used him.”

“A guy that stupid doesn’t deserve to go on breathing,” said Azara.

“He won’t for much longer. I will let him live until Phase Two is completed. Afterward I want no traces to us left in America. It is unfortunate that we are forced to use an American to smuggle our product into their country, I wanted to take *no* chance of being discovered beforehand. However,” he went on, “we need to get this final shipment of bills to Miami now! With Phase Two only days away, we do not have time to wait for another work visa for one of our wrestlers.”

“It’s a shame I can’t take it, boss, but they still search our jet and everything in it every time I fly to the U.S.”

“Yes, the illicit drug trade has made using private airplanes very risky. Our method is foolproof, that is why none of our couriers have ever been apprehended.”

“We were forced to use foreign wrestlers for Phase One,” said Azara, “making the operation a lot riskier. I’ll be glad when we can go back to using just our own people. If we had to use weaklings like Fuller for very long, we would be found out sooner or later.”

“Don’t be fooled by Americans like Fuller,” Chango said. “As with the Englishman we snared, he is a degenerate gambler. It is a sickness, one that is easy to take advantage of. All men, of course, require sex, especially if they are too long removed from their wives or girlfriends. Even so,” he raised a finger in warning as he went on, “the American Secret Service agents who will be looking for us are not weak like Fuller. They are dedicated and very difficult to corrupt.”

Azara’s face twisted into a bestial grimace. “Then I will *kill* them instead!”

The Yakuza boss looked across his desk at the vicious face of his



hired killer and matched his icy expression. "The Americans incinerated many members of our organization and fifty million yen at Hiroshima. It has taken me many years to rebuild. They refused to repay me then, but they will pay me now!"

He stared deeply into his huge henchman's eyes. "Yes! If the Secret Service tries to stop us, we will kill them!"

### 3

"Just ask my wife!" brayed a crazed-looking fan. "I *knew* you was going to smack the snot out of him! I knew it all along!" Waiting for me at the bottom of the ring stairs, he grabbed my hand and briskly pumped it while I looked at him and mulled over his claim to be clairvoyant. The blue-haired woman clutching my other hand either had a nervous condition that featured head nodding, or was backing up his story.

As I moved past the gushing pair and swayed up the aisle, other members of the audience stopped me to swear they had also *known* I was going to win my match. I thought it cruel that none of them gave me the good news *before* I met scary Tarzan. Now that I was aware of their talents, maybe I could get one of them to look into the future to see how many years my life had been shortened by the experience. I didn't need a fortuneteller to tell me *I would never forget the last twenty minutes.*

There was a large clock over the dressing room door. It showed the time to be 8:25. I had been here less than two hours, yet it seemed much, much longer. As my body made its weary way back to the dressing room, my mind made *its* weary way back down the trail of wild experiences and bizarre people I'd met since first walking into this place.

A large ceiling fan rotated high overhead and the empty Fort Myers Armory felt refreshingly cool after the hot Florida sun and muggy, moisture-laden air of the parking lot. Dimly lit, the inside area was about the size of a small high school gym, though the only visible item of an athletic nature was a wrestling ring placed in the middle of a hardwood floor.

As I moved deeper into the building, I saw a man who looked like he might be the Armory custodian. Wearing a light gray shirt and trousers, he took folding chairs from a rack and set them up along one side of the ring. I stopped a short distance away from him and waited until he looked over at me. "Excuse me," I said, with a smile. "Can you direct me to the dress-

ing rooms?”

The man seemed glad to stop what he was doing and stared at me for a few seconds before he replied; “I’ve been taking care of this Armory for a while now, pal, but I haven’t seen *you* before,” he said, smiling back at me. “So you first got to tell me if you’re a *good guy* or a *bad guy*.”

My training had not included good guy or bad guy lessons. Told by my instructor that experience working in the profession should be the basis for persona formation, he said that I would know when the time came. The time hadn’t come yet and I didn’t have a clue. So, lost for an answer, I decided to level with the Armory man. “I really don’t know,” I said. “I’m new at this.”

“No problem, then,” said the custodian. “Just tell me who you’re rasslin’ tonight, and I’ll tell you which one you are.” My smile grew sheepish as I realized I was about to expose gross ignorance about my own doings. “I know this is hard to believe,” I said, “but I don’t know that either.”

“What’s your name, buddy?” he asked, smirking.

“Well,” I replied, stepping toward him and offering my hand, “believe it or not, I know the answer to that one. I’m Mick Michaels.” As he shook my hand, I put an apologetic tone in my voice as I went on, “I don’t think that’s going to help you much.”

“Call me Bill,” he said excitedly. “No kidding, *you’re* Mick Michaels?” he asked, his voice rising. “You’re the Olympic rassler my boy told me about!” Before I had a chance to reply, he went on in a scolding voice, “I went fishing Saturday morning and missed the rasslin’ show on TV, but my son watched it. He’s an amateur wrestler and bugged me all weekend to let him come watch you rassle tonight. Anyway, I didn’t know what you looked like,” he explained, “but it seems to me like *you* should know the score. You’re a *good guy*, Mick, and your dressing room is right over there.”

I thanked him for the directions and walked toward the door he pointed out. Wondering what he meant about not having seen me on the TV show, I was lost in thought as I opened the door and moved into the room. Before my line of sight cleared the door, I heard a voice inside the room say something that sounded like “kay fabe.”

I stepped through the doorway and came under the hard-eyed scrutiny of three men sitting around a table placed in a far corner of the large dressing room. From their looks, these guys *had* to be professional wres-

tlers. They were involved in a card game and looked annoyed at having it interrupted. Without moving a muscle, they eyeballed me in silence for a few seconds.

“Oh, shit!” groaned the nearest man, turning back to his cards.

“Sweet Jesus!” moaned a second man, doing likewise.

“You gotta be kidding me!” spat the third man, shaking his head in disgust before again checking out his cards.

Amateur wrestling is an extremely aggressive sport and very few champions become so by having a defensive mindset. I came into the dressing room planning to politely introduce myself and, because I was a newcomer, show respect for men already versed in the profession. On the other hand, I *am not* a defensive sort and, for quite some time now, unprovoked hostility brings out the smart-ass in me. I pulled the door open and looked at the front side of it, then asked, in a puzzled voice, “This *isn't* the lady’s restroom, is it?”

A simple enough wisecrack, it caused the trio to look up from their cards and eyeball each other for a few seconds. They gave the mixed impression they weren’t sure if it was or not, didn’t care and couldn’t be bothered to answer. After another long pause, the guy nearest to me took on the role of spokesman. “What’s *your* name, sweetheart?” he asked, keeping his back to me while he studied his cards.

Rugged looking, with thick, blond hair and a dark tan, he didn’t sound all that keen about making my acquaintance. I knew this was a new profession, one I needed to get into, but starting out as designated patsy was never a role I took willingly. I quickly walked over to the table and offered my hand to the spokesman. “I’m Jack. Jack T. Ripper!” I said, hoping these guys had a sense of humor.

He hesitated and looked again at his chums before reluctantly placing his hand in mine. I managed to keep a smile on my face while checking him out for whatever injury had paralyzed his hand. Though the rest of his body looked solid and muscular, I clasped a piece of flesh that, except for not being cold and slimy, could have been that of a jellyfish.

“Matt Burns!” he barked, fixedly studying his cards. Moving around the table, I offered my hand next to a slender, handsome black man, elegantly dressed and adorned with gold necklaces and rings. With his balding head turned away from me, he listlessly stretched out a long arm to plop four well-manicured fingers into my waiting palm. He too had a

hand strength shortage. "Big Dick Hurtz!" he said, also memorizing his playing cards.

Pear shaped and Oriental in look, the third guy stood up and bowed from the waist about ten times. Several inches shorter than my six feet, he was dark-eyed, bald and had a fu manchu mustache on his swarthy face. Speaking while on the down-stroke, he also avoided any eye contact during the ceremonious greeting. "Wun Hung Lo!" he chirped, in a sing-song voice.

It was clear they were *not* amused, and I tried again to break the ice. "You guys haven't seen any pro wrestlers around here, have you?" The three men rolled their eyes at each other. Sneering, they nodded their heads in my direction and talked to one another in a form of pig latin. While I didn't get the whole of what they said, words that sounded like jumbled versions of *dildo* and *numb nuts* hinted they might be talking about me.

No welcome mats were going to be taken out and dusted off for my use any time soon. Their attitudes would have been just fine as reactions to a known sex offender, with a visible and highly contagious venereal disease, who had just asked to be fixed up with their seven-year-old sister.

There was always the chance they were merely poking fun at a rookie. If that was the case, they were dead serious in the process. Any one of the three, or all of them, could be involved in the criminal intrigue I was investigating, so I really didn't give a rat's ass about their ill will.

Even so, it *was* an awkward moment. With a lull in the conversation, the thought of all the thrills I could have unpacking my wrestling gear became impossible to resist. Picking up my bag, I moved to the opposite corner and parked myself.

The trio went on as if I didn't exist, and ignored me for the rest of my stay in the dressing room. With a derisive snort, Matt Burns began a story, using several examples to develop the depressing theme that amateur wrestlers are *never* successful in the pro ranks.

During his tale, the door to the dressing room opened to admit a weathered-looking man, carrying a small suitcase. Though he had shiny black hair, his lined face and slightly stooped body showed he had a few years on him. He closed the door, put his bag down and listened until Burns finished the story before walking over to introduce himself. "I'm Jerry

Meyers,” he said, with a southern twang. “I’ll be refereeing yer match, so don’t try nothing funny.”

Along with this information, he gave me a masterful demonstration of the now familiar cadaver handshake. “You ain’t one of them amachures, are you?” he warily asked. Suspiciously squinting at me, he had the look and tone he might have used to inquire if I was a transvestite. It looked like all these guys were fixated on putting down a rookie and, needing to gain acceptance to their profession, I decided to back off a little.

“I haven’t made any money in *this* business yet,” I replied. “So I guess the answer is yes.”

He wasn’t cheered by the news and his face took on a mournful cast as he shook his head. “That’s a damn shame, boy,” he said sadly. He slowly turned away from me and moved across the dressing room like a man grief-stricken by what he’d heard. He recovered enough from his sorrow to shake hands with the other veterans, and I noticed he casually fish-handed each of them as he had me.

Maybe this sissified style of greeting one another, although totally at odds with the image of strong and aggressive men, was merely the way it was done in pro wrestling circles. Finding a chair, Meyers settled himself, looking dejected and muttering under his breath from time to time.

Big Dick Hurtz now told of *first matches* he had seen, the common story line being they *all* resulted in disaster. He started with beginners whose first chance was bumbled into their last by a display of inability so total as to instantly sink them back into the obscurity they rose from.

More ominous were tales of rookies whose first match resulted in them being injured or crippled. After ten minutes, Hurtz wound down, maybe feeling his confidence-building stories had inspired me enough. Jerry Meyers evidently didn’t agree with him and quickly picked up the slack with a tale of his own.

Rousing himself from the depression brought on by meeting me, he grew a big smile and began. “You boys recall Jack Reefer when he was promoting Boston? Well, ol’ Jack was from before television and had all these wild gimmicks to get guys over to where they could draw money. One time he gets this acrobat,” Jerry paused and made a circling motion with his right hand, then went on, “who could flip and do them somersaults. Them Tarzan movies was real hot, so Jack’s gonna make a new Tarzan out of the guy. His idea is to have the boy wear lion skin jockey

shorts and swing into the ring on a rope, just like in the movies. So, he has the feller practice swinging down out of the balcony until he's got it perfect."

Jerry grew more outgoing by the second. Stopping only to nod and wink at his fellow veterans, he eagerly continued, "Up comes the night of the show, and the building is packed. When it's time, the new boy's up in the balcony, getting ready to swing down." Jerry held up a forefinger and grinned nastily as he went on, "Only, Jack has forgot something. His guy has been practicing during the day, with the house lights on. Now, when it's for real, them lights are turned off, plus the feller has a spotlight shining in his face." With an incredulous look, Jerry ruefully shook his head and continued, "Well, he swings down anyhow, can't see a damn thing, lets go of the rope too soon, smashes into the side of the ring and breaks both his legs."

I was shocked as I watched Jerry pause to savor the immense delight of his sadistic audience before continuing the grisly tale. "Jack runs over, sees the new boy ain't getting up no time soon, grabs the rope and pretends to have a shit fit. He gets the microphone and tells the crowd the rope has been messed with. Then he goes back to the dressing room," Jerry chuckled a couple of times before he went on, "leaving the broke-leg boy laying there screaming. After a while, he comes back with one of his top *heels*, who gets the mike and takes credit for the messed up rope, then puts the boots to the broke-leg boy."

Beaming, Jerry was the picture of joy as he continued, "They damn near have a riot, so it takes most of thirty minutes before they can cart the guy out of there. By the time they got him loaded in the ambulance, he was hollering like one of them banshees." Pausing as he came to the punch line, Jerry checked to make sure he had everyone's attention before going on. "The whole thing goes over great, with Jack doing sellout business for the next six months. A year goes by, the broke-leg guy calls and says he's all better, can he have another chance? Jack tells him, 'Piss off! What you done fer me lately?'"

Burns, Hertz, and Lo yukked it up big time, growing almost hysterical with laughter when Jerry added a footnote. It seems the injured man had threatened to sue, but the case hadn't made it to court because, as Jerry put it, "The guy didn't have a leg to stand on!"

All four of the veterans displayed a sick sense of humor with their

reaction to the woeful story. Bursting with good spirits, they howled with laughter and acted like they had heard the funniest joke ever told.

The storytelling session had the opposite effect on me and a sinking feeling grew in the pit of my stomach. The hostility and animosity of my new colleagues coupled with my own newness to produce the thought that my first match might also become a candidate for the Catastrophe Hall of Fame.

As I now struggled to walk up the aisle without reeling, I realized I had not only survived my first match but actually come out the apparent winner. I had gone into it with very little idea what to expect, had met alarm, confusion and surprise, and was now walking away with little idea of what had really happened.

Still dazed from the match, I found it hard to ignore the praise from pleased fans. I was showered with admiring looks, pats on the back, congratulations and applause from all sides, and felt almost carried away by the lavish acclaim. I knew it was the stuff swelled heads were grown from, but had just spent twenty minutes feeling highly lacking and found myself using the heady tribute as balm for my wounded poise.

Nearing the dressing room, I turned a deaf ear to the flattery. I knew my hero status was a sham, a fact the waiting veterans would agree with and be quick to point out. Any inflated ego I was foolish enough to bring back into their harsh company would be squashed like a grape under the heavy heel of their contempt.

Several young girls stood in front of the dressing room door, holding out programs and ink pens. It took a moment to realize they were autograph seekers, though that wasn't the reason I stopped. I needed to gather myself before answering the bell for round two of locker room rookie bashing.

As I signed my name, I had a new thought. Maybe that was all behind me now. I had survived my first match, with the junior partner of my tormentors being more than a little responsible. Once out of the dressing room, Jerry Meyers had been a great help to me.

Now that I had been in the ring, maybe professional courtesy would prompt his harassing henchmen to also ease up. With that hope in mind, I returned to the dressing room. Closing the door on the hungry attention of

the fans, I slumped back against it for a second.

Questions ran through my mind, but the mystery of what really took place in the ring would have to be solved at some later time and place, I was tired of thinking about it. There were more pleasant things to consider from the night's work, and I began to feel a small sense of success at making it through the bout without stinking up the place.

"After losing to this chump, Tarzan is finished as a wrestler, but he can always get work as a magician!" said Matt Burns with bitter assurance. "He'll be the only guy in the magic business who can make chicken salad out of a bucket of chicken shit!"

"Tarzan better go see a Doctor right away!" said the singsong voice, sounding very worried. "For this cabrone to beat him, he musta had a heart attack or something!"

"Right on, bro," mourned Big Dick Hurtz. "Tarzan is a cool dude, but he ain't got his shit together tonight!"

The three wrestlers were in various stages of readiness for their matches, and clearly intent on being heard. Tired as I was, I couldn't cut these guys any more slack, giving me another reason to thank Tarzan. His size and ferocity made such an impression on me, it seemed a minor detail that there were three of them to deal with. Ignoring the odds, I pushed myself away from the door and headed over to see about raising my respect level.

"You was sure the drizzling shits for a while there," came the gruff voice of Jerry Meyers from behind me. "But, all in all, it weren't *too* horrible." I turned around to see him grinning at me from the doorway, the door held open just enough to admit his head. "Why don't you stick around and watch the rest of the matches?" he went on, winking at me. "You might learn something."

Before I could reply, he turned his attention to the Oriental-looking member of the harassing trio. "You think that's a church bell that's been ringing, you Mexican heathen?" he said acidly. "Get your burrito-eating ass on out here!"

"Chinga ta Madre, bastardo!" snarled Senor Lo. "Up yours!"

Learning that Jerry shared his sharp tongue with everyone allowed a mental putty knife to fill in some of the gouges he'd put in my ego. His comments also took the wind out of my sails and changed my mind about making any challenges. There was a stack of programs on one of the



chairs in front of me. Under the pretext that getting one had been the purpose of my walk over that way, I picked up a copy and returned to my corner seat.

Wun Hung Lo was revealed by the program to be Shiki Okina, "The Japanese Assassin." Pictured on the cover atop the name Ronnie Rogers was Matt Burns, and the disaster master, Big Dick Hurtz, was called Bobcat Stevens.

Okina was now on his way to the ring, leaving Rogers and Stevens still available for a showdown. I thought again about confronting them, but decided it wasn't worth the effort. With my anger faded, their hostility seemed better ignored.

When I took off my sopping wrestling gear, I was surprised to find even my boots soaked through with sweat. It was early summer and not that hot in the building, making me realize just how demanding the last couple of hours had been.

My body had been sapped by the challenge of wrestling Tarzan in the ring, the tests here in the dressing room more of an emotional drain. Thinking over the trials forced on me in each place brought to mind a familiar saying that seemed to fit the situation. Interchangeable, going from one of them to the other was very much like jumping out of the frying pan into the fire.

## 4

Ten days before, in Belfast, Northern Ireland, twenty-five members of the Irish Republican Army went on a shopping spree. It was late Friday afternoon, the banks had closed, and each man had forty thousand dollars in American hundred dollar bills to spend. They had sixty hours to spend it.

They divided the city into sections and each man set out with shopping list in hand. He used most of his currency to buy gold coins, small precious stones, rare stamps, traveler's checks and money orders, all liquid, untraceable items. No purchase was for more than three thousand dollars. There were fifty-nine currency exchange locations in Belfast. Thirty of the hundred dollar bills were exchanged at each one.

Other IRA members went on a weekend trip. Groups of five went to Galway City, Cork, Derry, Donegal and Rosslare. They too had forty thousand dollars in American hundred dollar bills. They spent it in the

same manner as their confederates in Belfast.

No currency trader in Ireland could be used more than once. Belfast did not have enough of them for the IRA to avoid detection before the sixty hours had passed. Combined, the other cities had more than three hundred, and American dollars were highly desirable at each one.

They were used to buy German marks, Japanese yen and Swiss francs, and each exchange was for three thousand dollars. When the designated time was up, over a million dollars of foreign legal tender had been purchased with the American money. In all, the IRA spent two million dollars.

The same operation was going on in nineteen other major cities: London, Paris, Berlin, Madrid, Hong Kong, Singapore and Johannesburg among them. In each city, members of an underground group or criminal organization used American hundred dollar bills to purchase two million dollars worth of liquid items or foreign legal tender.

It went on for sixty hours. When it was over, the groups had forty million dollars worth of assets in their possession. The merchants and money traders had nothing of value in exchange. The American currency was counterfeit.

## 5

I had a job to do and wasn't learning a great deal by being ignored in the dressing room. I decided to look elsewhere for signs of wrongdoing. Showering quickly, I was in time to watch the final minutes of Shiki Okina's match. It surprised me to find him popular with the fans, a fact out of harmony with his assassin's image, oily manner and sneaky style.

Maybe it was a case of his being the lesser of two evils. I saw on my program his opponent was a guy called "Skunkman," who worked overtime to live up to his weasely name. Wrestling barefoot, Skunkman wore only a filthy pair of denim jeans held up by a frayed rope belt.

His pallid skin was grimy and dirt-covered in places, looking like he might really reside in an underground burrow of some sort. The crowning touch was a white streak running front to back through the center of his mangy, black hair. Perhaps genetic mutation was the reason for his identity crisis.

Looking like he needed a breather, Skunkman went outside the ring to scrounge around the ringside fans, causing them to recoil from his ap-

proach like people in Biblical times had shied away from well-eroded lepers. I thought he and Big Bertha would make a remarkable couple, but he took pains to avoid her entirely.

Jerry wore his maggots-in-my-salad face much of the time and seemed on the lookout for any stray breeze that might surprise him in a downwind position from the rank wrestler. As the time limit in the match grew short, Skunkman assumed strange, agitated poses, as if frustrated in some deep-rooted need to fully express himself.

I watched the match from a distant spot, but began backing away from the ring while I speculated on what lengths this guy might actually go to in his imitation of the real thing. Before he could do anything too gross, the Japanese/Mexican wrestler judo-chopped him into a trance of some sort and ended the match. Instead of rousing cheers, many of the nearby fans merely gave sighs of relief.

Jerry looked pleased at not having to raise Skunkman's hand and didn't help him up as he had me, instead making a hasty exit. The whacked wrestler was left in the ring to recover alone and convoyed back to his dressing room by, from the look on faces I could see, only the thick nausea of the spectators.

The bell clanked, and I saw Jerry making his way back down the aisle toward the ring. It looked like that the next match was between two bad guys, as neither of the names on my program belonged to anyone in my dressing room. First to arrive was a short, swarthy, extremely hairy guy with a dishrag around his head and a rolled-up carpet clamped under one arm.

He wore trunks with a camel-shaped patch across the seat, and also had on some strange-looking footwear. Similar in every other way to normal wrestling boots, the ones he wore had what looked like miniature rhino horns curling up from the toe area. Entering the ring, he snatched the microphone from the ring announcer and launched into a first-rate imitation of a strangling werewolf laboring to make itself understood through a serious speech impediment.

Choking, hacking and frothing, he moved to all four sides of the ring, haranguing the fans in some unknown, perhaps even new, language. Eyes rolled back in his head, he whirled and lurched, wildly flailing the air, as if groping for something, with his free arm. There was no way of knowing what he might be in search of, but it was clear from his antics, whether real

or put on, one thing he'd lost was his mind.

He worked himself into a total fit, gargling and slobbering up a storm until he was blue in the face. Unable to fathom a word he spewed out, I was surprised that a majority of the spectators wildly reacted to his raving. Maybe he'd brought a translator to some prior Armory wrestling show, and the fans recognized a familiar speech pattern.

Whatever the cause, most of the onlookers took his lecture quite personally. Jumping to their feet as he circled the ring, the fans launched a torrent of verbal abuse at him. Though most of their criticism was voiced in English, many of them also displayed knowledge of international sign language by shooting him the bird.

Possibly feeling a stroke coming on, the lunatic ended his tirade with one final series of gibbering barks and returned the microphone to the ring announcer by throwing it at him. The announcer, calmly plucking the mike from midair, gave evidence of having worked with nut cases before. Without missing a beat, he informed everyone the gargling werewolf weighed 235 pounds, came all the way from Saudi Arabia and could be addressed as "The Great Mephisto."

The second bad guy approached the ring. Wearing boots and black trunks, he was fleshy but muscular, about six feet tall, and looked to weigh around 260 pounds. With his wavy brown hair and rugged good looks, he cut a heroic figure as he strode up the ring stairs and stood on the apron. He looked vaguely familiar to me; I looked at my program again and felt a happy surge of excitement.

After stepping through the ropes, he was announced as being ten pounds heavier than my estimate, from Oklahoma, former Florida heavyweight champion and, to my delighted realization moments before; Lew Dallas. I was thrilled. Here, at last, was a kindred spirit; someone who could show me how a guy from the amateur ranks performed in the pro style.

Like me, Lew Dallas was a former amateur turned Pro. We were both National champions, he was heavyweight on two Olympic teams; with a silver medal to show for it. I had seen him compete as an amateur during a tournament to select a U.S. Pan-American Games team held at Michigan State University in my hometown of East Lansing.

A sophomore in high school at the time, I had been impressed by his size and skill. I knew he had gone on to win a gold medal at the Pan-Am Games held later that summer, but lost track of him after that. Now, nine

years later, here he was, igniting a surge of anticipation in me as he readied to take on the werewolf.

I was surprised by the lackluster reception Dallas received. Except for a few catcalls and Bronx cheers, mingled with physical forms of belittlement, he entered mostly unnoticed by the fans. Turning it over in my mind for a moment, I thought of a possible reason.

The audience hadn't been overly excited when I came down the aisle for my match either. Yet, in one manner or another, they strongly reacted to everyone else on the card. They had been awed by the ferocious Tarzan, intrigued and sickened by the Japanese/Mexican against the guy possessed by a skunk, and lectured into a rage by Mephisto the werewolf.

All these wrestlers had one quality in common that Lew Dallas and I lacked. Covering a spectrum from merely goofy to total mental case, they all showed signs of having a few bats loose in the belfry. I concluded it was because Lew Dallas didn't appear to be in any way unhinged that the fans seemed bored with him.

During Mephisto's seizure, Jerry remained in one corner of the ring, arms across his chest, watching the performance with benign indifference. Now he stepped out of the corner and signaled for the bell. As soon as it rang, Dallas moved to the center of the ring, his facial expression and body language a portrait of manly fiber and grit.

Mephisto ignored his opponent and raised a restraining hand toward the referee. Jerry walked over to see what he wanted and was rewarded with a ranting earful of werewolfese and a spit shower. Raving and spraying, Mephisto pointed to the mat, his rug, several points on the horizon, Dallas, himself, then the mat again. Jerry took the lapel of his shirt and wiped his face with it several times, then turned around and signaled to Dallas a time-out was being called.

Mephisto took the carpet from under his arm, laid it on the mat, unrolled it and stood erect. Appearing to achieve a hypnotic stupor, he stared off into outer space, shuffling his feet in a clockwise turn until he was focused in on some distant location.

From all the evidence so far, plus the befuddled look on his face, his mind might have been anywhere from the dark side of the moon to the Twilight Zone. Adjusting the carpet to face in the direction he fixed on, he knelt on it and grew the mesmerized look of a man in deep meditation.

"Come on, Meyers," asked a whiny voice. "You're not going to let

him get away with stalling like this, are you?"

Lew Dallas had acquired the microphone to lodge his complaint. In my opinion, since his voice was one of those better suited to silence, it was an unwise move. High-pitched to the point of being screechy, his petulant whine was extremely grating to the eardrum.

Matched with the pout he now wore on his face, the sounds coming from Dallas didn't give the impression I'd expected from a guy with his background. Unable to remember any conduct like this during the Pan-Am tryouts, I tried to focus on the plus side of the situation.

Lew's eagerness to begin battle certainly had its merits, even if his means of showing it were somewhat flawed. Stiff-arming him in the chest, Jerry kept Dallas from attacking the entranced Mephisto and explained his position as official.

"Ain't you heard, Dallas?" he asked, also using the microphone. "We got religious freedom in this Country, even for Ay-rabs. He's figured out where Meccer is, you just stand back and let the man pray fer awhile."

Taking his cue, Mephisto raised both arms overhead and, babbling like a loon the whole time, bowed until his head touched the carpet. After ranting into the rug for a few seconds, he raised up to repeat the ritual. The audience showed very little tolerance for Mephisto's religious beliefs and seemed to be considering an amendment to the Constitution.

A volley of boos, hisses and curses hit the ring, chased by a few coins and crumpled-up paper cups. Evidently tuned in to the same wavelength as the fans, Dallas made another rush at the prostrate Mephisto. As Jerry again stepped in front of Dallas, I began to have my doubts.

Attacking a guy while he lay on his face praying seemed somewhat cowardly, even if the praying guy was nuts and not very popular. Mephisto apparently lost patience with the intrusions and jumped up from his carpet to again spray Jerry, this time with complaints about the lack of peace and quiet for his devotions.

Even without the microphone, his demands came across loud and unclear, making me feel sorry for Jerry. With one ear assailed by Lew's screeching whine, the other tortured by Mephisto howling like a rabid coyote, he would probably feel right at home running the six-foot blade at a busy sawmill.

Dallas and Mephisto repeated this song and dance three times. Things would gradually quiet down to the point Mephisto felt the necessary re-

spect was being shown for him to resume his prayers. He would do one or two salaams before Dallas was overcome with impatience and made another blundering charge. Jerry would cut Dallas off, Mephisto would jump up howling, Dallas would whine, and Jerry would suffer.

Shortly after their fourth rendition of this routine, the announcer stated that five minutes had elapsed in the match, thrusting the fans into the lead in the complaint department. Anyone wandering in late might have thought they had crashed a crowded seminar on creative group bitching.

By this time, my confidence in Lew Dallas had fallen to the point that, if he ever *did* do anything, he was going to have to be overwhelmingly brilliant at it just to break even. Perhaps sensing a growing sentiment in the onlookers that he be forced to eat his rug, Mephisto finally rolled it up and placed it in his corner.

He turned to face Dallas, unveiling the moment of truth at last. Lew Dallas was finally going to get to show his stuff, causing me to lean forward, intent on watching my one-time fellow amateur spring into action. When Jerry stepped from between them, Dallas put up both fists, flailing them in a circle in front of him, as if challenging Mephisto to a boxing match.

Mephisto also began to flail, indicating that he accepted the challenge. While it was action, the two of them cautiously circling and flailing away at each other, it was of a most curious kind. The first time around the circle, they needed arms six feet long for any hitting to occur. Slowly edging closer to one another, by the fourth lap they were only inches away from possibly making contact.

At this point, Dallas seemed to hear his own private bell ending round one, causing him to make a mad dash out of the ring. Once safely on the floor, he turned back to whine and pantomime at Jerry that Mephisto had been about to *hit* him. Since it was he, after seven screeching minutes spent raising every neck hair in the place, who started the fisticuffs, his whimpering launched a tidal wave of disgust.

Maybe to ensure he had a broad sample of spectator opinion, Dallas walked around the ring eyeballing them. The crowd seemed of one mind in their scorn and dislike, and two older women with canes even rose creakily from their front row seats to reward his efforts.

The sight of them advancing, canes raised overhead to do some flailing of their own, prompted Dallas to step on the gas and pass them by

before they could bring wrinkled arms to bear. I hoped Big Bertha would heave herself up to block that side of the ring—thereby giving the old ladies a second chance for some cane testing during the spineless wrestler's return trip.

Sadly, she seemed to have vented her spleen on Tarzan and merely spat at Dallas as he skulked by. One man in the front row stood up and sloshed him with a soft drink, following it by shooting him the bird. Dallas moved toward the guy, then quickly changed his mind when a dozen fans, some with sodas, all with birds, rose to join the slosher.

Jerry began to count as soon as Dallas left the ring. Every time he neared a twenty count, meaning disqualification for Dallas and victory for Mephisto, the Arab wrestler did something to keep the referee from completing it. All told, I figured Jerry counted a total well past fifty by the time Dallas got back into the ring.

The announcer informed everyone that ten minutes of match time had expired. From the reaction of the fans, also dead was any feeling other than extreme loathing for what they were seeing. Mephisto and Dallas moved into position to lock up for the second time.

After several false starts and changes of mind, they both gave every indication they were *actually* going to touch one another. As Dallas reached for him, Mephisto, looking so goofy I knew there had to be a full moon out, dashed out of the ring to the floor. Dallas looked peeved at having his big move stolen and jumped to the floor after Mephisto, setting off a chase around the ring. The crowd went wild at seeing some action at last. When Mephisto, with Dallas hot on his heels, shot under the bottom rope back into the ring, the small armory was pandemonium.

Mephisto excited the crowd even more by backing into a corner, falling to his knees and begging Dallas not to hurt him. Belying his threatened position, Mephisto grinned openly. Unless he was a masochist, looking forward to a well-deserved thrashing, his expression was odd.

Dallas, on the other hand, was the picture of misery at suddenly finding himself a hero. As he took in fans cheering him on and screaming for him to pound Mephisto, his face grew a deep frown. He lunged at his opponent and tried to drag him out of the corner, causing Mephisto, a startled look showing through his grin, to clutch the ring ropes with a death grip.

Dallas strained mightily to pluck the Arab from the corner, tugging and pulling to no avail. Apparently snapping from frustration, Dallas let go of



the stubborn Mephisto, slugged the referee and himself signaled for the bell before jumping to the floor and stalking back to his dressing room.

Jerry brought up a hand to protect himself when he got punched out, thereby masking his reaction to the startling move. All the other faces in the building were in plain sight, however, wearing much the same look as mine. Wide-eyed and slack-jawed, we gaped at the departing Dallas like a secret sect of imbeciles whose long-lost leader has suddenly been revealed to us.

Not looking all that upset at being belted, Jerry signaled for the bell then leaned through the ropes to speak to the announcer. Mephisto also looked kind of jovial, though no less addled. When the ring announcer stated that Dallas had been disqualified and he was the winner of the match, the Arab refused to let Jerry raise his hand in victory.

He put the dishrag back on his head and clamped his carpet under-arm, all the while giving signs of again wanting to do his werewolf impression. Heading him off at the pass, the ring announcer quickly called for a five-minute intermission, unplugged the microphone and, taking it with him, disappeared up the aisle.

The group response of the audience to the match was strangely comforting. Among the compliments I'd received in the dressing room had been one about "not knowing whether to shit or go blind!" One or the other of these options *had* to be at the top of the list of reactions, from all those unlucky enough to have seen it, to *this* bogus bout. With no stam-pede to the restrooms or evidence of sight loss from the stunned audience, I saw they also had become unable to make this critical decision.

What could have happened to Lew Dallas in the last nine years was beyond my wildest imagination. Any thoughts of him as a role model were long gone, though I wasn't going to forget him entirely. I deposited his performance in my memory bank, in case I might someday soon feel called upon to portray a buffoon.

As Mephisto and Jerry headed down different aisles back to their dressing rooms, I decided to do likewise. With the lights turned down once the wrestlers entered the ring, I hadn't been noticed while watching from a dark corner of the Armory. Now that the house lights were back on, a few fans began to approach me.

As I moved through them, the spectators surprisingly weren't that pushed out of shape. I thought the majority would be lined up at the box

office, loudly demanding their money back. Though many of them shook their heads in disgust, they seemed, more than anything else, glad it was over.

Much happier was the foursome I found in the dressing room.

"What did I tell you guys about candy ass amateurs?" sneered Ronnie Rogers, hooking a thumb in my direction. "Dallas had all the heat and let Frankie steal it from him!"

"Yup. He messed up when he chased ol' Mephisto," said a grinning Jerry. "I think I'll mosey over to their dressing room and see how they're getting along. Bobcat! You and your stooge come on out when you hear the bell," he peevishly went on. "Don't make me come and get you like the greaser here did."

Shiki Okina whirled in his seat and hissed at Jerry's departing back. "If you could grease her like I grease her, Meyers, your old lady might quit screwing everything that moves!" Leering, he went on, "Somebody told me the other day she humped a woodpile, because she heard there was a snake under it!"

With his hand on the doorknob, Jerry turned and looked back at him. "The little woman likely figured a woodpile snake is a step *up* from diddling a taco bender," he said, in a reasonable tone. With a condescending look, the veteran went on, "Now, even with you being an ignorant Mexican, who don't know shit from Shinola, you should know I don't mind you doing my preliminary work for me."

Jerry grew a friendly smile as he continued, "Why, she even told me that little pecker of yours tickled her the one time you didn't squirt in your britches."

Jerry shut the door behind him, leaving Rogers and Stevens highly amused at his parting shot. Senor Shiki wasn't laughing much, but he did smile a little. I found the strange banter amusing, but my invisible man status left me unasked for an opinion.

Not bothering to use the pig latin, they went on with their conversation about Mephisto and Dallas. I still didn't get what they were talking about. It had to do with who had the *heat* in the match, thereby having *the people*. If *heat* meant having someone behind you, my status with my new colleagues had me at the temperature level of a fudgesicle. And if *the people* were the unlucky spectators who watched their match, my opinion was that they felt for Mephisto and Dallas in such a way that they

would not get behind either wrestler unless given the chance to shove him off a high cliff.

## 6

Six days earlier in Knoxville, Tennessee, an undercover narcotics officer for the sheriff's department sold an ounce of cocaine to a local resident, then arrested him. The busted cocaine buyer paid for the drugs with hundred dollar bills. The money was entered as evidence and placed in an evidence locker. Events in the hours following the arrest caused the bills to be taken from the locker and examined.

The bills weren't all the same, but several had matching serial numbers and Knoxville police notified the U.S. Treasury Department. Fifteen minutes later, a government jet was speeding toward Knoxville. As soon as it landed and came to a stop, Secret Service agents rushed out of it into state police cars and were driven at top speed to the home of the busted cocaine buyer.

The agents already knew they were too late to take custody of the local man. Bailed out of jail after eighteen hours by a man the sheriff described as "an Oriental of some kind, a great big ol' boy," he had been released. Two hours later, his body was found by Knoxville police near a rural road leading to his home on the outskirts of the city. He had been bound, savagely beaten, and mutilated before being killed by a blow that crushed his throat.

His murder so soon after being released led Knoxville homicide detectives back to the money he used to buy the drugs, the discovery that it was counterfeit, and the call to Washington.

When the agents arrived at the home of the murdered man, they found that his house and garage had been torn apart by an earlier search. They went over them again and thirty minutes later, inside an air-conditioning duct in the attic of the house, an agent found almost one hundred thousand dollars in counterfeit one hundred dollar bills.

The murdered man had two prior arrests on drug charges. When he was arraigned, the arraigning judge had set his bail at one hundred thousand dollars. Because of the priors, the judge ordered the man to come up with half of it out of his own pocket. He had made several phone calls, the first of them to local numbers, trying to get bailed out of jail.

When he had no luck finding someone in Knoxville to put up fifty thousand dollars cash bond for him, he made one more call. His fourth phone call was traced to a number in Tokyo, Japan. Eighteen hours later the huge Oriental showed up to bail him out.

This connection and the murder itself launched a search for the man who posted bond. The name on the identification he used was not found on any federal registry as an American citizen or official visitor to the United States.

The murdered man had made his living as a professional wrestler named Buddy Walsh and had, one day prior to being arrested, returned to Knoxville from a wrestling tour of Japan. His real name was Bill Fuller.

## 7

After a few minutes the bell sounded, stirring Rogers and Bobcat to final preparations for action. Still half-naked, Shiki Okina sat in a corner of the dressing room, earphones on and a small video player next to him on the card table. That he from time to time burst out with an offkey “Ei-Yi-Yi-Yi,” told me it wasn’t Japanese music he was listening to.

Okina clearly planned to remain in the dressing room for the time being, removing my chance to look for evidence involving him, Rogers or Stevens in the counterfeiting. I didn’t think I would pick up any clues merely by watching the next match, but it beat hanging around in the dressing room waiting for Shiki to serenade me.

Intent on returning to my dark corner of the Armory, I slipped out of the dressing room ahead of Rogers and Stevens. A minute later they made their strange approach to the ring. Leading the way, Rogers seemed agile and light on his feet as he moved aggressively down the aisle.

He had on wrestling trunks and boots, and his semi-naked body was revealed to be a smaller version of Tarzan’s. A couple inches short of six feet tall and listed in the program at two hundred and twenty pounds, Rogers was powerfully built and appeared to be in terrific shape.

Bobcat Stevens, looking distinguished in an expensive, well-tailored suit, gracefully glided down the aisle behind his cohort. Standing half a head taller than Rogers, he glanced indolently around him, acting like he couldn’t make up his mind whether to be bored or not.

Well-received by the fans, these two acted as if they were the *bad*