

# Shapeshifter Finals

by

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## Shapeshifter Finals

The crowd roared as the first pair of wrestlers engaged in competition out on the center mat. "Aww-riiiii-choooo-guyyyys!" "HUGGA-HUGGGA-HUGGGA-HUGGGA!" "Wickety-(psicry!)-wickety-(psicry!)-wickety-(psicry!)" Hog Donovan peeked over in the direction of the match, but tried not to get drawn into watching it. Neither of the contestants in the ninety-three pound class was human, and better he should keep his mind on his own upcoming match.

"Gaaieee! Gaaieee!" "Brackit-it-it-it-it-it-it-it!" "Wheeeooop-ooop-ooop!" The assortment of cries from the stands was damned disconcerting, the crowd being over half extraterrestrials. It was the opening bout, finals round, in the 57,463rd Annual Games of the IntraGalactic Interworld Multicultural Amateur Wrestling League--and the first games ever to be hosted by Earth. Hog Donovan prayed that the human fans could drown out all the ETs when he got to the mat himself. He was as nervous as a laboratory rat on speed, and he was going to need all the psychological boost he could get.

Hog paced the warmup area in his tights and warmup jacket, trying to still the butterflies in his stomach. It would be at least forty minutes yet before they called him to the mat, for the hundred thirty-eight pound finals. An eternity! Hog threw himself into his warmup exercises and tried to blank out everything else.

*Bye-bye baby, baby bye-bye...* The refrain of a popular song repeated mercilessly in his head, warring with the cheers of the crowd.

Hog grunted, working up a good sweat. Hog indeed! He was long and whiplike, and bore his nickname only because his old heavyweight friend, Hermie "Harmin" Harmon, had dubbed him "Hog" in retribution for his jokes about Harmon's rhinolike neck. Those were the old days, but the name had stuck...

The crowd roared, and Hog was startled to realize that the first match was over--the victor a mercurial-skinned creature from Tau Ceti. The next weight class was up, and--hey!--this was the only other human finalist, a wiry little Brit named Johnnie Johnson, up against some sort of centipede from the Vega asteroids.

Hog ducked through to the sidelines to yell encouragement. "Give 'im hell, Johnnie!" he hollered as the Earthman trotted onto the mat. His voice was drowned out by a loud buzzing. Up in the stands, a large

contingent of centipede fans were rubbing their upper limbs together, en masse, cheering on their fellow Vegan.

Hog suppressed a shudder as he watched Johnnie engage the centipede from a standing position. All those *legs*. And they were so...insectlike. And quick. With a chitter and a blur of speed, the centipede caught Johnnie's left ankle with several of its legs, and tripped him for a two-point takedown. The crowd buzzed in appreciation.

"*Get up! Keep moving!*" Hog yelled.

*Tap tap*. Hog started at the rap on the top of his head, and turned to see Coach Tagget urging him away from the sidelines. "But coach--"

"Hog, go warm up. Don't fret over Johnnie, you're just scaring yourself." Tagget rapped him on the skull again. "Don't forget--"

"I know, I know, the brain is the most important muscle," Hog repeated by rote, as he turned back to the warmup area.

"*Think* about your match. *Think*," Coach Tagget urged, as Hog resumed his stretches. After a moment, satisfied with Hog's progress, the coach left to go watch Johnnie himself.

Think, right. Think about the fact that he was about to wrestle an alien named Belduki-Elikitango-Hardart-Colloidisan, an Ektra shapechanger capable of assuming about a thousand different multiworld multicultural body configurations. He was thinking about it, all right. And he was having trouble keeping his knees from shaking.

*Bye-bye baby, baby bye-bye...*

He remembered how smug the Earth promoters had been when the IIMAWL rules committee had offered to make terran rules the norm for this tournament, in honor of the hosting world. Of course, none of the promoters had even *thought* about the fact that Earth's wrestlers would be competing against sentient bugs, snakes, gorillas...and shapeshifters...except that they'd finally decreed a return to the more modest, and protective, tights in place of skimpy singlets. In other respects, the referees' interpretation of Earth's rules had turned out to be a tad subjective, to say the least.

"*Johnnie--NO!*"

The single shout from the Brit's coach was drowned out by a rising buzz from the crowd. Hog jumped up, trying to see what was happening. The centipede buzz crescendoed. Hog ducked through an opening in the sidelines crowd to get a better view.

Uh-oh. Johnnie was in big trouble. The centipede had him halfway onto his back, with about six legs pushing his shoulders toward the mat. Hog knelt on the sidelines, twisting and arching sympathetically as Johnnie struggled against the inexorable leverage of all those limbs. Johnnie's coach, a wiry little man, was screaming, "*Scoot out! Scoot out!*" and making futile sweeping gestures with his arms.

Hog cupped his hands and screamed, "*PULL HIS ANTENNAS! PULL HIS ANTENNAS!*"

The match seemed to freeze abruptly, as the centipede cocked its head and glared across the mat at Hog with all four eyes. Its hairy antennas bristled. Hog gulped, regretting his impulsive yell. The thing looked as if it might just abandon the match and come on over and stomp him for his remark. It appeared to have completely forgotten its opponent.

Johnnie seized the opportunity. For an instant, it looked as though he might actually grab the thing's antennas--which would have been a definite foul--but instead, Johnnie managed to get an elbow inside the thing's legs and knock out several locked joints, loosening the centipede's grip. The crowd buzzed, and the centipede turned back to its opponent, but Johnnie was already wriggling quickly out of its arms.

"*That's it! That's it! That's it!*" screamed the coach, waving wildly.

Johnnie was frantically trying to complete his escape. He had one leg out now and was up on the other knee. The human crowd was screaming.

The centipede spasmed with rage and tackled Johnnie with a dozen legs. They fell together to the mat with a *whump*, knocking the breath out of Johnnie. Before Hog could even rise up on his toes to yell, Johnnie was on his back under the centipede, the ref was down on five elbows, peering to see if shoulder blades were touching the mat, and--*slap! tweeeeeeeet!*--just like that, Johnnie was pinned and the match was over.

The centipede humped its back and drew away from its human opponent, chittering triumphantly. Johnnie sat up, gasping. The centipede crowd went crazy rubbing their limbs.

Hog caught Coach Tagget's eye and turned away, sighing, to return to the warmup area. Johnnie had finished in second place. That meant the honor of Earth, wrestling-wise, rested on Hog. He swallowed, trying not to think about it. But how *could* he not think about it? He was the only human left in the finals. All eyes, and cameras, would be on him.

As he was stretching his hamstrings, Johnnie walked past, shaking his head. "Tough luck," Hog sympathized.

The Englishman paused, peering at him with dazed eyes. "Are you the bloke who got that thing as mad as a raving hornet?"

"I--well--" Hog spread his hands. "I was just cheering for you. You almost made it out, too. Sorry you didn't--"

"You know what those bastards *smell* like, when they're on top of you and they're mad?" Johnnie wheezed. "Cheeeeeez-z-z," he whispered hoarsely. "That was what damn near killed me." Johnnie shook his head and wandered off toward the clutches of the TV interviewers. "It wasn't the bloody pin..."

Hog saw Johnnie's coach staring darkly in his direction. He went back to his warmups. Stretch left, stretch right, down, up...

"*Heyyaaah, earthman krrreeepy-krrreeepy...*"

Hog turned, wrinkling his nose at a sudden whiff of ammonia. The centipede was standing beside him, balanced on half its legs, waving the claws on the rest of its legs in his direction. "Uh--?" Hog managed. "Can I, uh, help you?"

The centipede's antennas waved drunkenly. "*Hoho yassss,*" hissed the centipede. "*Krrreeepy-krrreeepy earthman sso sssmart! Come ssee me lataaah.*" **Poot.** It made a loud spitting sound. "*Yahh-heyyy?*"

Hog backed up a step. "I don't know what you're talking about--"

The centipede chittered with laughter and sauntered away. "*Lataaaah, earthman...*"

Hog stared after it in disbelief. He jumped when he felt a hand on his shoulder. Then he heard the familiar sound of his coach tsk-tsking.

"Poor sportsmanship, Hog. That's all that is--poor sportsmanship. What do you expect from a centipede?" Tagget scowled at the Vegan, who was now parading in front of its fans, waving its arms in triumph. "Look, why don't you go on back to the locker room and clear your mind. I'll call you when it's time to come back out."

Hog nodded with relief. Yes. Back to the locker room. Forget centipedes. Have a swallow of honey for quick energy.

*Bye-bye baby, baby bye-bye...*

He trotted back to the locker room, shaking the tension out of his arms.

All things considered, it was actually pretty amazing that Earth had ever gotten nominated to host the IIMAWL tournament. After all, by 2008 A.D., the farthest any human had ever gotten from Earth was the Moon. But the interworld sporting federation liked to give a boost to newly discovered worlds. And Earth was among the newest--not yet five years a part of the interworld community, since the Rigellians had landed and made first contact, and promptly proposed building factories here to employ the locals. In the eyes of the terran promoters, the tournament was not so much a sporting event per se as a promotion of tourism and general economic opportunity aimed at ETs who might want to spend money here. And in that respect, it was already successful, at least to the tune of a new sports complex for Cleveland and a good crowd of paying ET visitors.

The human wrestling world, on the other hand--the top wrestlers, the Olympic and AAU winners--had been pretty resistant to the idea, claiming that it was insane to pit oneself against aliens whose bodies were so different as to render competition meaningless. Mostly, the sports writers echoed that position, denouncing the games as blatant sensationalism. Still, there were some good, if maybe not great, wrestlers who hadn't seen the obvious--and had wound up entering the competitions that one wag, as *Time* was so fond of putting it, called the "crocodile free- for-alls."

That's the kind of wrestler Hog Donovan was: not great--but sharp, determined, and something of an iconoclast. He figured he only had a few good years of wrestling left in him, and he was determined to make the best of them. And the way to do that was to enter a competition so new, so outre, that the mainstream wrestling world hadn't caught on to it yet. And maybe, Hog figured, it would *become* recognized, and maybe it would even give *him* enough recognition so that once he'd hung up his tights and joined the working world, he wouldn't have to work on a Rigellian assembly line building Lotusflower roadsters.

Anyway, that was the reason he'd given his parents and his coach, though it was really only half the story. The other half was that he'd sacrificed and sweated blood at this sport for over seven years now, and by God, he wanted to be the best damned wrestler in the galaxy--okay, *one* of the best damned wrestlers in the galaxy--even if only for one brief, glorious moment.

To his own surprise, he'd done well, working his way through four preliminary rounds, and winning the semifinals just yesterday, narrowly besting a titanium-boned opponent with twice his strength and half his agility and intelligence. He was proud of that victory and the semiconductor-medal it had assured him of, and the recognition it brought to his home planet.

But right now, he had to focus on just one thing--and that was how the hell to wrestle against an Ektra shapeshifter.

He paced in front of his locker and shook the tension out again. Peering around the corner of the lockers he saw one of the black-skinned African wrestlers warming up and he gave a collegial thumbs-up of encouragement before returning to his own spot. Wait a minute! he thought suddenly. There *aren't* any Africans in the finals.

He heard a loud *crack*. Uneasily, he peered around the corner again. The black-skinned being, which was *not* human, was separating its joints as if they were held together by rubber bands. It was pulling its right forearm out from its elbow, and dislocating its shoulder and stretching it way behind its neck. The creature grinned a gleaming grin, and Hog withdrew to his own corner, shivering. A *transformer*, he realized. Just like the toys that a kid could flex and twist until they'd changed from, say, a spaceship to an atomic monster. What world was this creature from?

Don't think about it. Think about your opponent. How are you going to beat Belduki-Elikitango-Hardart-Colloidisan?

He'd only seen the shapeshifter once, briefly, in a preliminary round. "*Belduki's its name, and throtlin's its game,*" was how the *Plain Dealer* had put it, in pointed reference to its reputed predilection for near-strangulation of its opponents. That was obviously an exaggeration for effect; nevertheless, it unnerved Hog, who devoutly regarded wrestling as a gentleman's sport, safe and well regulated. He'd always scorned so-called ""professional wrestling"" (he always mentally put several quotes around the phrase, to emphasize his disdain), in which contestants were slammed to the deck, or thrown against the ropes, or otherwise theatrically mistreated. Real wrestling wasn't like that; it was a sport of skill and conditioning and determination.

It'd come as a shock to learn that in the IIMAWL, there was not entirely the same sense of careful sportsmanship. Oh, sure, there were some protections: no contestant could emit chemicals toxic to the opponent, for instance. But with the contestants so morphically different from one another, monitoring safety was a lot harder than it was between human wrestlers. One contestant might turn blue with concentration, another with suffocation. Would a ref who heard that cracking sound of the transformer recognize it as the sound of breaking bones in a human? In the end, the IIMAWL claimed to be keeping the sport safe, but it was Hog's uneasy suspicion that they mostly threw up their hands, flippers, and toes, and said to hell with it, let's *try* to keep them from killing each other, but if a ref misreads a physiologic sign, what are we supposed to do?

Think about the Ektra, Hog thought, shooting a practice takedown in the empty space in front of his locker. Think about the Ektra.

The shapeshifter. Actually, he'd been more or less counting all along on Belduki-Elikitango-whatever being knocked out by Gazoom Gazoom the Indefatigable Baboon and returning champion, from Veni Five. After his own victory against Titanium Jimm, Hog had been carefully planning ways to defeat the baboon...ingenious ways, resourceful ways. And then the stupid baboon had gone and fallen right into the Ektra's four-armed can-opener in the third period, and *boom*, right onto his back. *Slap! Tweet! (Psicry!)* The ref called the fall, and there went all of Hog's planning, out the window. And now *he* faced the shapeshifter.

Hog drew a deep breath and blew into his cupped hands. This was no good--hanging around the locker room, thinking about what could go wrong. He'd be better off out on the floor, soaking up the psychic energy of the meet. And where the hell was Coach Tagget, anyway?

Hog reached into his locker, took a long drag from his plastic honey bear, and slammed the locker shut. For just an instant, as his hand was about to close the combination padlock, he hesitated. What if he were knocked unconscious and they needed to get into his locker? Good God, man--stop it! He

squeezed the lock shut with a decisive click.

As he strode up the echoing passageway to the gym, he heard shouts from the crowd and felt a surge of adrenaline. He broke into a trot, and darted past a couple of ETs who were half blocking the end of the passageway, and jogged out toward the end of the arena.

The crowd erupted with a roar of approval. He smiled to himself, flushing with confidence, then peered over to see what they were actually cheering about.

*TwEEEEEEEEet! Slap!*

The 133-pound match had just ended with a pin. An alien that looked like a huge gerbil got up, shaking, from under one that looked like a leaf. The ref flagged the leaf as the winner.

And Hog was up next.

*Bye-bye baby, baby...*

Coach Tagget found him just in time to yell something incomprehensible in Hog's ear, shake his hand vigorously, and push him onto the mat with a whack on the rear. Hog shook off his irritation at the coach and stepped onto the mat with a glance at the ref.

A new referee had come out from the table, replacing the one who had just tweeted the last winner. This ref looked a little like a centaur with multijointed legs, and big paddle-shaped hands, great for slapping the mat. Good, Hog thought. The better to signal Hog Donovan winner by fall. None of this eking out a victory by points. Hog Donovan goes for the whole enchilada. Starting right now. This is for *Earth*, and this is for *Hog*. He swung his arms, huffing. Damn straight.

"You can do it, Justin! Tear his lungs out!" screamed a woman somewhere in the stands. Hog smiled a little. He couldn't pick her out of the crowd, but he knew his mother was waving her program wildly, endangering the eyesight of everyone within reach. His father was just as avid a fan, but he'd be too busy with the fastcam to spend much time yelling.

A blast of easy listening music filled the gymnasium from somewhere overhead--a sampler of Earth culture to entertain the ET crowd.

Hog's opponent streamed onto the mat from the opposite side, and gathered itself up into something resembling a whiplike tree. Its feet, if that was what they were, stretched out like roots, and Hog could have sworn that the roots were embedding themselves in the mat. What the hell kind of creature was this? Ektras didn't make up shapes; they always emulated real species that Ektras had known, somewhere in the galaxy. Hog puffed into his fist and looked at the ref, determined not to be distracted by unanswerable questions.

The announcer's voice boomed: "IN THE ONE HUNDRED THIRTY- EIGHT POUND CLASS! FROM EARTH: HOG DONOVAN--HUMAN!" There was a murmur of approval, plus his mother's shrieks, but not exactly the thunderous roar Hog had imagined. He glanced up into the crowd, and saw a row of centipedes sitting on their legs. "AND FROM EKTRA FOUR: BELDUKI-ELIKITANGO-HARDART-COLLOIDISAN--EKTRA SHAPESHIFTER!" Hog held his breath, waiting for the cheers for his opponent. What he actually heard was more like a group indrawn breath of fear.

He noted that the Ektra had sprouted about a hundred suction cups on the ends of its tree branches. He was going to have a dickens of a time avoiding *those*. Hog danced in place, thinking hard--and coming

up with very little, strategy-wise.

Fortunately, he was saved from despair by a voice that boomed out through the general noise: "HOGMAN, YOU PIN THIS WALKING JELLO-SALAD, AND DRINKS ARE ON ME FOR THE REST OF THE *YEAR!*" Hog grinned despite himself, and at that moment caught sight of Hermie "Harmin" Harmon in the front row, shaking his hammy fists in the air. Harmin' now worked the graveyard shift at Lotusflower Assembly, hanging transaactional warp modules under Rigellian interstellar roadsters. He hadn't wrestled in three years, and his physique now resembled that of a hippopotamus. Was that what was in store for Hog, after his wrestling career ended? Lotusflower Assembly, with the rest of the guys? Not if he could help it...

Hog frowned and stepped into a crouch, facing his opponent.

The shapeshifter waved its branches. The ref gestured with its paddles, and Hog reached out to grip the nearest branch in a handshake. The suction cups latched onto his hand, and let go with a *pop*. Hog shook off the stinging sensation. The ref leveled a paddle-shaped hand between the two contestants, then jerked it away with a *tweet!* on its whistle. The match was on.

Hog danced sideways, and forward and back, snatching in quick grabs at the shapeshifter's branches. He was just testing, seeing if he could get the thing off balance. The Ektra waved its branches unconcernedly. Its feet remained planted. Hog circled, trying to make it lift its feet and follow. The Ektra didn't turn at all; it just waved different branches at him as he circled. Where the hell were its eyes, anyway--on the leaves? And what would constitute putting this thing on its back? he wondered.

"Cut 'im down, Hog!" he heard, in the dim distance of the sidelines. Harmin', cheering him on. His friend sounded as if he was miles away.

"You don't have all day, Donovan--go in after him!" he heard on the other side. Coach Tagget, offering helpful strategy.

Hog shrugged off a negligent grab by one of the branches, and without thinking launched his attack. He shot forward, low, grabbing for the base of the shapeshifter's trunk. It was a purely instinctive move--go for the single-leg takedown, whether the thing had legs or not. It worked better than he could have expected: the branches waved madly above him, and some of the suckers came down on his back. But he got good penetration, and wrapped both arms around the Ektra's trunk. He got one knee up under him, and lifted, hard.

The Ektra didn't budge. It was holding itself down not so much by its roots as by a large sucker at the base of its trunk. Hog grunted, trying to break it free. As he strained, the Ektra's branches were clinging to his back, though fortunately the fabric of his tights top kept it from getting too secure a grip. Grunting harder, Hog dug his fingers under the edge of the tree's suction base. He heard his coach's distant voice: "--the *hell* are you doing?"

"Gaaaahhhh!" With a roar, Hog pulled up with his fingers. *Spllook*. The Ektra came loose from the mat, and he had it in the air like a heavy Christmas tree. He staggered, turning with it, trying to tip it over. The tree was snatching at his back and his arms. Hog lost his balance and went over sideways, taking the tree with him.

Even as they fell, he could feel the thing changing shape. By the time they hit the mat, the Ektra was an extremely slippery snakey thing, sliding out of his hands. Hog tightened his grip, trying to keep it from getting away. But it was impossible; it had some sort of coating that made it slick as hell. He scrambled to follow it on the mat, desperately trying to hold on long enough to get the takedown points.

"Queeeeee!" whistled the shapeshifter, and with a convulsive jerk slithered out of Hog's hands.

"No points!" brayed the ref, prancing alongside.

Hog glanced up in frustration. He was *sure* he'd earned the takedown points, even if he had to concede a one-point escape. Was this ref going to be an impossible-to-please type?

The glance was a mistake; it distracted him from his opponent. By the time he looked back, his opponent was gone.

*Whufff!*

His breath went out with a gasp, and he felt the snake's coils wrapping around him from behind. How could it have moved so fast? he thought uselessly, as he struggled to jam his elbows down into the coils to protect his ribs from the rapidly tightening pressure.

"Queee-ee-eeee!" chortled the snake, in what sounded like a merry laugh. Prelude to strangulation? Hog wondered. The next coil whipped around his ankles, and he fell to the mat like a hundred and thirty-eight pounds of frozen meat.

"Two-point takedown!" whinnied the ref.

"Augggh!" Hog grunted, trying to keep from rolling onto his back. The snake was trying to get him to do just that, but it didn't have a firm enough hold on his legs, and he was able to scissor hard and gain some leverage, getting himself halfway up to his elbows and knees. "Hunhh! *Uunhh!*" He was struggling just to breathe. He could feel himself sliding a bit inside the slippery coils, despite the pressure. If only he could slide out...

In fact, he was moving a little, squirming in the coils. "*Unhhhh! Unhhhh!*" He inhaled as hard as he could, held his breath a moment, then gasped it out and jammed his elbows hard against the coils. He pushed them down by about a foot.

The snake tightened like a vise around his hips. His progress stopped; the coils were smaller than his hipbones. "Auuughhh!" Hog groaned, blinking at the sight of the ref leaning close, maybe to make sure he was still breathing. If he wasn't turning purple now, he never would be!

He heard a din and a stamping around him. The crowd was loving it--probably hoping he got squeezed to death.

Coach Tagget was yelling something, but he couldn't hear what it was. But another voice reached him through the cacophony: "HAWWWWG--SLAM 'IM TILL HE LETS GO!" he heard distantly.

Hermie. And good thinking. Hog huffed, raising himself on all fours, lifting the snake's weight. He suddenly went flat, hitting the mat as hard as he could, right on the snake's coils. He felt them loosen for an instant, and he squirmed frantically...

*Tweeeeeeet!*

The snake gave a last squeeze, then relaxed its grip as the ref halted the action.

"Warning!" brayed the ref. "Slamming is forbidden! Warning number one against the human!" The ref waved his paddle-hands.

Hog gasped, trying to catch his breath. Warning or not, he had a fighting start now; they would resume

the match from a one-up one-down position. As the coils unwound, he lumbered to his feet and walked in a brisk circle to shake off the effects. Then he knelt back down on his hands and knees.

"Shake it off--shake it off!" he heard his coach yell. "Now stay out of those coils!"

Hog glanced back to see if the Ektra would take another shape. But no--he could only change shape while the clock was running. That was a regulatory concession to the nonshifting wrestlers: the shapeshifters had the advantage of versatility of form, but they were momentarily vulnerable during the change, and for a few seconds following, while they "got into" their new forms.

"No delay!" called the ref. This time it was yelling at the shapeshifter. The Ektra seemed to be having trouble deciding how to situate itself on the top position over Hog: it had no hands or feet to place on or near him. "Rest your head on his back!" the ref instructed.

"Queeee?" protested the shapeshifter.

"On his back," repeated the ref. "No delay, please."

"Queeee," it answered.

Hog felt the snake's head touch the center of his back. He glanced over his shoulder and saw that the creature was arching over him from a base of coils on the mat, and was indeed touching him just on the center of the back. Good. He just had to move faster than the snake.

*Tweet!*

Hog launched himself up to a standing position, whirling away. He felt no resistance. "One point escape!" called the ref. Hog spun around to face the snake.

"QUAAARRRRRRRRR!" roared the creature that was facing him-- no snake now, but an enormous, maned animal with a mouth full of large teeth. (*TERROR! TERROR! I'M BIGGER THAN YOU!*) Hog backed away, startled. He tripped on the heel of his sneaker and fell to his knees.

"QUAAAAAAAAAAAA!" bellowed the Ektra, charging. (*BARE YOUR GNEEPHITZXX...!*) echoed its psicry.

For an instant, Hog was paralyzed with fear--like a man who'd stumbled in front of a rabid lion. Do something, he thought. Get out of its way! Then something in him snapped, and instead of using common sense and fleeing, he leaped straight at the charging beast with a bloodcurdling Tarzan-yell. "AAAHH-AAAUUGGHHHH!" He was going to meet those teeth, and it would all be over before the ref could tweet his whistle, but he couldn't stop himself.

The Ektra lion halted in midcharge, bewildered by Hog's furious yell.

Hog slammed into it, grabbing it around the neck. The damn thing was all fur and air; it weighed the same as he did, but at three times his size. The Ektra went over like a bowling pin, perhaps too surprised to react.

*BLAAATTTT!*

*Tweeeeet!* "No points!"

Hog rolled away from the shapeshifter and leaped to his feet. "Whaaat?" he yelled. "I had him--"

"End of first period!" called the ref, strutting away on its four centaur legs, ignoring Hog's protest. Hog

sighed, wheezing for breath. Damn, this wasn't looking good. He had to do *something*.

"Ref, you blindfolded nag! If that wasn't a takedown, what was it?" came a scream from the sidelines. Hog kept his back to his coach as Tagget demonstrated proper Earth sportsmanship. Not that Hog didn't agree with him.

He turned and stared at the leonine alien, whose unreadable eyes were just shifting from Hog to the ref. (*I crush you.*) "Quaaaaaa?" it asked the ref.

"Call the toss!" whinnied the centaur, holding an oversized poker chip in its paddle-hand. The chip was red on one side, blue on the other.

"Quaaaa," grumbled the Ektra.

The ref flipped the chip. It fluttered and landed red side up on the mat. "Up or down?" it asked, pointing to the Ektra, who had apparently called red.

"Quaaa," it said, with a shrug of its furry shoulders.

"Ektra up! Human down!" announced the ref, pointing to the center of the mat. Hog knelt and assumed the position.

"No teeth, shapechanger!" yelled Coach Tagget as the lion-thing positioned itself with two large paws on Hog's back and its mouth open, breathing hot, fetid air straight down on the back of Hog's neck. "No biting allowed!" shouted Tagget.

"QUAAAAAAARRRR!" answered the beast with a terrifying rumble. (*I SQUEEZE YOUR--!*)

"Get up and away from him!" Hog heard through the ringing in his ears.

The ref peered at the two, raising a flat hand. *Tweet!*

Hog scrambled, and felt the lion all over him. It felt heavy, and it was quick, and its breath made him reel. But it had to be tiring with all that movement, and maybe Hog could wear it out. He soon realized something, and the lion must have, too. Except for its teeth and claws, which it couldn't use, it had no good way to hold onto him other than hugging him in a smothering embrace and staying on top of him. If Hog could just shoot his legs out to the side and keep moving...

He felt the Ektra changing shape even as he did so. He made it partway out of the Ektra's embrace, then lurched to stand up. He turned, hopping back and away--and was nearly free when he felt a tentacle whip around his left ankle. He hopped harder, trying to jerk away, but the tentacle was faster. He managed to turn to face his opponent, and found the tentacle attached to something that looked as if it had crawled out of a very dark lagoon. God only knew what planet the original was from. It had a head like a moldy stump and two squidlike tentacles that sprouted from the head, and it was trying to snake its other tentacle around Hog's right leg. Hog hopped madly to evade it, and the lagoon creature responded by hoisting his left ankle to a ridiculous height, practically to his chin, with the first tentacle. Hog was left hopping like a crazed ballet dancer, struggling not to lose his balance.

"Krrreeeee!" screeched the lagoon-thing.

"F-f-f...says you!" gasped Hog. No, don't talk to it! he thought. Save your strength, save your strength. He jumped, trying to lever his weight downward to break free, but the tentacle's grip was tenacious.

"You can do it, Justin!" screamed his mother's voice, from somewhere.

"Get yourself out of there, dammit, Hog! How'd you get into that?" he heard, from another direction. He was completely disoriented with respect to the room; he could only focus on the mat, and this infernal creature.

He jumped higher. The tentacle went higher. He still didn't break free, and now his leg was up as far as it could possibly go, and his hamstrings were screaming.

"Krrrreeeeee!" urged his opponent.

"Scree you!" Hog retorted angrily.

*Tweeeeeeeet!* The ref strode forward, breaking the impasse. It turned to Hog and waved a paddle in his direction, while braying to the scoring table: "The use of abusive language is prohibited. One point penalty against the human!"

"What?" Hog gasped, limping away from the Ektra.

"References to the opponent's progenitors are strictly forbidden!" scolded the centaur with the whistle. "Assume the position."

"Ref--you piece of Arcturan fungus!" screamed a voice from the sidelines. "You mold, you donkey! You wouldn't know a foul if it came up and plugged you--you--!"

Hog ignored his coach's rantings and assumed the position.

The centaur was staring coldly in the direction of the sidelines, but it said nothing, until the shapeshifter had hunched behind Hog, its tentacles on his back. A little too *firmly* on his back, Hog realized.

"Ref--wait a min--"

*Tweet!*

Hog was a moment slow in moving, and the shapeshifter had its tentacles around his waist by the time he was into his standup. He was on his feet, but he couldn't break free, and he began lunging one way and then another, trying to loosen the thing's grip. He dug his hands down under the tentacles to break their hold. Yes--he had them loose! "Aarrrrr!" he snarled, spinning and bracing his feet outward. If he could just arch, he could complete the escape...

He staggered a little, as the Ektra pushed him backwards off the mat.

*Tweet!* "No points!"

Hog cursed under his breath and returned to the center of the mat. This time he was ready.

*Tweet!*

He was up, turning, leaving the lagoon-creature on the mat...except for the tentacle that whipped out and caught his ankle and jerked his leg high in the air. "Gaaahhhh!" Hog roared, hopping...hopping...hopping...

Time seemed to slow and twiddle its thumbs as he danced, evading the second tentacle, while struggling in vain to escape from the first. He edged slowly toward the out-of-bounds, and the lagoon-creature slowly dragged him back.

Time took a coffee break. Time went out to an early lunch...

And Hog hopped...hopped...hopped...

Would the period never end? he thought desperately, throwing his weight up and down with fading strength. Would time never run out on this eternal second period...?

*BLAAATTTT!* went the buzzer.

*Tweeeeet!* "No points!" called the ref.

Hog gasped, as the Ektra released his leg.

"Shake it off, Hog--shake it off!" "Go, Justin--!"

He gulped air as he staggered in a circuit around the mat, before going to assume the top position for the final period. "Whattza score?" he rasped to the ref.

"Three to one, Ektra," the ref informed him.

From somewhere overhead, the strains of country-western music filled the gymnasium.

For Earth, Hog thought dizzily, focusing on the form of the creature before him. Do it for Earth. Do it for wrestling. For wrestling. For the tricrystal medal. Just gotta do it, somehow. *You're on camera--the only human left.*

"FREE DRINKS, HAWWWG!" yelled Harmin'.

*Tweet!*

He hurled his weight into the lagoon-creature, hoping to topple it over. His only hope now was to turn it over for the fall. He felt its weight giving way...altering shape under him. What the hell was it going to be this time?

For an instant, he felt a disgusting slime under him, as the Ektra's form dissolved. Repulsed, he involuntarily loosened his hold a little, and as he did so, a hundred and thirty-eight pounds of Ektra bounced up into his chin. He almost lost his grip, but somehow recovered his balance and thrust himself against the Ektra with all the strength his legs had left.

*Boing.*

The Ektra bounced back against him.

*Boing.*

It bounced away from him, veering unexpectedly to his right, and doing a backflip out of his arms. He threw himself against it before it could get completely away, tackling it and carrying it out of bounds.

*Tweeeeet!*

Panting, Hog took a good look at his opponent as it settled, more or less, into position in the center of the mat. It looked like a large coil spring inside a knotted sock, and it seemed unable to stop bouncing completely, even in the starting position. It bobbed and jittered at a sort of idle speed, reminding Hog of his Uncle Wainwright, who could never sit still, bouncing and gumchewing his way through entire ballgames--and who had often belittled Hog for choosing wrestling over basketball. Hog glared at the coil-springed Ektra, and imagined it shapechanging into his Uncle Wainwright.

With a silent snort, Hog settled behind the Ektra and placed his hands carefully on its trunk, prepared to tackle it as viciously as he could. The centaur-ref peered at him for a moment, seemingly unable to decide if his positioning was legal. Then it flipped its paddle-hand. *Tweet!*

*Boing.*

Hog lunged into the bouncing shapeshifter, and bounced with it, *boing, boing*, right off the mat. He got up glaring even harder. Time was running out, and it didn't do him any good just to hold the thing down, he needed to pin it. But how could he pin a coil spring? The one thing that encouraged him, as he watched it bounce back to the center of the mat, was that it was starting to look tired. Maybe all this springing was wearing it out.

At the whistle, Hog threw his weight into it again, and landed flat on his chin. For an infuriating, flustered moment, he thought he had lost the Ektra, and he scrambled to get up, looking around wildly. Then he realized that the Ektra was under him; it had splatted out into an enormous pancake with tiny, starfish legs around its outer edge. He pushed and hauled on it, but the thing was immovable.

"Turn it over! *Turn it over!*" yelled his coach, his mother, somebody.

He couldn't *possibly* turn it over--unless he got off it completely and tried to flip it like a throw rug. But that would be crazy...it was too heavy and too awkward.

"Warning--Ektra--stalling!" brayed the ref.

"*Hog--you're running out of time! DO SOMETHING!*" hollered Harmin', from somewhere very close to the edge of the mat.

With a snarl, Hog jumped off the pancake and yanked on the edge of the thing. It went "*Querrreee!*" and began contracting into a new shape. Good! Now he could go to work on it!

The change took place in a dizzying blur, and it was not just a physical blur. Hog felt a wave of confusion pass through his mind, and he blinked and found himself holding the hand of, and staring into the large brown eyes of, the most breathtakingly beautiful woman he had ever seen, or imagined. (*Come...come to me...now...*) whispered the psycry. She had long, golden-brunette hair; and she was wearing a clinging silk wrap that did not altogether cover her breathtaking...her breathtaking...

...and she was breathing so hard, so *quiveringly* hard, and pulling him by the hand toward her with a smile that made his heart stop.

"Whoaaa--Hog! All riiiiight! Go for it, man, go get it!"

The sound of Harmin's voice was strangely removed, as though Hog and his...opponent?...had been whisked into a private place for a special little *tete-a-tete*, with everyone else suddenly a very long way away, miles away, light-years away. (*Yes, yes...come get it...you will like it very much...*) And, for a fleeting instant, Hog thought that was fine, just fine, very fine indeed. For the glory of Earth fine. Oh yes.

And then maybe a whiff of oxygen reached his brain, or maybe a whiff of astringent alien breath, because the hypnotic spell slipped just a little, and his heart seemed to beat again, and with a start he realized that he was sinking to the mat, allowing himself to be drawn into the arms of this...about to pull this gorgeous creature on top of him, this...

"*Get that goddamn tramp off you, Justin!*" screamed someone, his mother.

...Ektra shapeshifter.

"Awwwww, jeeez!" he panted, struggling to get his brain clear, and realizing he had about one second before he'd be flat on his back under this...sex-crazed...

The woman's weight was already shifting for the pin. And his mind was still fogged...but not quite so fogged that he couldn't make one last, desperate hopeless move.

He reached down and tickled her in the ribcage.

"Breee-heee-heeeeeee!" shrieked the shapeshifter, erupting into helpless laughter and losing its hold.

Hog scooted out from under it, but managed to keep his fingers in there tickling. He was gasping from the exertion, but his gasps were drowned out by screams of laughter...

"Kreee-hee-hee-(stop)-hee-heee-kreee-(stop)-heee- hee-hee-(please stop!)-hee--"

Hog struggled to disregard the psicy pummeling his mind. He hugged and cradled this creature, far and away more gorgeous than any woman he had ever even fantasized about, cradled her in a fabulous embrace...tickling mercilessly.

"Kreee-hee-hee-(stop please stop!)--"

"HOG, TEN SECONDS LEFT!!!"

The thing's laughter was contagious, and Hog fell on her, nearly laughing uncontrollably himself. And he pressed her back down to the mat, his left arm crooked in a careless reverse-half- nelson, his right hand tickling just below those magnificent--

*Whack! Tweeeeeet!* "Pin! The match goes to the human!" brayed the centaur-ref.

And he almost couldn't make himself stop tickling her now that he had her down, but the roar of the crowd was enough to make him look up in a daze, and the first thing he saw, past the four legs of the ref, was Harmin' Harmon jumping up and down like a dancing buffalo. His friend's voice was drowned out, but it hardly mattered. And the second thing Hog saw was the centaur bending down to look at him with apparent puzzlement in its eyes.

"Human, I am unsure how you did that," the ref said, waving its paddle-hands. "But congratulations. And if you don't get up off your opponent, it will be a shame that you will be required to forfeit the match..."

"Huh?" Hog released the Ektra with a start and sat back on his haunches, blinking in amazement at what he had done. He stood up shakily, and extended a hand to help his opponent up off the mat.

The Ektra-woman was pouting as it rose. But after a moment, its lips quivered and reformed into a smile...and then into a beaming grin. *A grin?* Hog thought.

"Earth!" "Earth!" "Earth!" "Earth!" "Earth...!" A chant had started in the stands and was growing in intensity. They were banging their seats now. "Number One!" "One!" "One...!"

"WAY T' GO, HAWWWWWG!" bawled Harmin' Harmon, striding up and down the sidelines, fists in the air.

"Look at the camera, Justin--look at the camera!" His mother was practically on the mat, pointing up into the stands at his father and the fastcam.

Hog grinned weakly and looked back at the Ektra. It was still a dazzling creature, but her grin had continued to widen, bright teeth sparkling, until the grin seemed to take up most of her face. And then

Hog realized dizzily that her face was slowly disappearing, leaving *only* the grin. And he stood, blinking, watching the grin fade last of all, until the Ektra was gone altogether. And Hog turned in bewilderment to the ref, who was looking toward the scoring table and didn't see any of it happen.

"Justin! Ask it to do that again! Your father missed it!"

Hog turned around, waving in confusion. "Say, uh--" he croaked to his absent opponent, "nice match!" And found himself thinking, Is it true? Is it really true? Did I win the tricrystal medal for Earth? *The only human in history to win a tricrystal?* And then the centaur-ref trotted back to him, and hoisted his hand in victory, and Hog forgot his doubts and waved triumphantly to the crowd. And when he turned, he saw a large, iridescent lizard rising up as if from the very substance of the mat and turning to shuffle away.

"Hey, Ektra!" he cried.

"Breee?" said the lizard, looking back. (*We like semiconductor medals better, anyway. (I lie!) (I lie!)*) it whispered in a psicry.

Hog laughed happily and patted it on the back. "Great match, guy. Next time don't be so ticklish!"

"Breee," said the lizard. (*Done well. Next match I get the home crowd, okay?*)

"Okay. See you around." Hog trotted off the mat, waving again to the crowd, and fell into the congratulating arms of his mother and Harmin' Harmon. He hardly even heard their voices, or the voice of Coach Tagget...

"Drinks on me, just like I said..."

"Where'd you learn to *do* that sort of a thing with a woman, Justin...?"

"Donovan, just like I been tellin' you, the brain is the most important..."

But if he didn't hear what they said after that, he did hear the chants of *Earth! Earth!* and he could already feel the tricrystal medal glistening and breathing in his hand. And he heard a centipede voice hissing, "Kreeeepy kreeepy earthman-- sssee you nexxt yearr on Meetsssnepp Ffive, hah-hahhh! Zerrro grrravity unlimited, suckahhh...!" Only this time Hog just laughed out loud and didn't even bother to look as he headed for the cameras, as the Vegan's voice faded back into the waves of *HOG DONOVAN! HOG DONOVAN! TRICRYSTAL EARTH...!*

Bye-bye Lotusflower, Lotusflower bye-bye!

## **Afterward for SHAPESHIFTER FINALS**

The act of writing this story brought back surprisingly powerful memories of my own wrestling days at Huron (Ohio) High School, more years ago now than I care to admit. Many elements of the story were lifted straight from my own experience. I don't think I'll say *which* elements; but one of my former teammates ought to recognize the hopping scene, since it happened to him.

This story was, in fact, something of a change of pace for me. I generally write novels not short stories--far future, cosmological, quasireligious hard science fiction about serious subjects. Artificial intelligence, first contact, transcendent encounters in spacetime--that sort of thing. The last time I tried a purely humorous piece was in my prepublished days, and it was in place of a term paper in graduate school. The professor, perhaps not unreasonably, expected a more serious effort. The topic, as I recall, was something like: "Coastal Zone Management in a marine estuary system." A perfect subject for a

humorous fairy tale, no? Well, it seemed so, at 1 a.m. the night before the paper was due. The professor's reaction was...quizzical. ("What the *hell is this*, Carver?")

That was in...let's see, 1974.

Nineteen years later, Roger Zelazny telephoned me one Sunday morning to invite me to contribute a wrestling story to this volume. (He recalled seeing a bio that mentioned my unsavory past as a wrestler.) In so doing, he accomplished three things. No, four:

- 1) He got me to write my first short story in almost ten years, and incidentally to try a humorous piece.
- 2) He got me to reflect back upon a sport that once commanded an astonishing amount of my energy and dedication, and in the process taught me a lot about life.
- 3) He left my wife starry-eyed with wonder: ("*Roger Zelazny's* on the phone! He says he's sorry to interrupt your work time, but he has a question for you.")
- 4) He got me out of bed.

Thanks, Roger. Here's to your memory.