

## Get Your Giggle On

### *Part.4 : Braying Bastion*

Bastion Misawa put down his notebook and sighed. His formulas ought to have worked. He'd prepared them carefully and plotted out the exact probabilities for each stage of the duel, and still he'd come up short. It seemed that there was always something. If he defeated Chazz, he lost to Jaden. If he defeated Jaden, he lost to Zane. Even when he and Alexis had scored a surprise upset victory over Chazz and Jaden in the Academy's Random Draw Tandem Duel Tournament, they had been defeated in the Academy Challenge Cup, and Chancellor Shepard's claim that North Academy had rigged its random draw had failed to overturn the result.

Was he really doomed to a life of mediocrity and second place, Bastion wondered. What made it harder to accept than it might have been otherwise was that he took dueling so completely seriously and studied himself to sleep every night, while others were much more casual and had about as much success. On some days, this did not bother Bastion. He could appreciate that studying eight hours a day would not make Jaden duel any better at all. Chazz usually reached his capacity for absorption fairly quickly as well. Alexis was studious, but could go several days at a time without cracking the books, and regularly did as part of her regimen. This suited each of his friends more than his style of analyzing everything to death.

But there were times when this stylistic quirk irked Bastion. This was just such a day. Alexis had gone shopping with her friends and canceled a practice duel, throwing his schedule off. Chazz had made a lucky guess and solved a puzzling question on which Bastion had taken two hours the evening before. And here was Jaden, actually taking another nap in the middle of Advanced Chains and Priority Class. He seemed to be mumbling something. Bastion nudged Jaden, who thanked him for waking him up.

"You really ought to get more sleep at night," Bastion told Jaden. "I've calculated that adding an extra half hour in bed has improved my dueling performance by 7.3%."

Jaden said, "I was planning a little surprise party for Chazz."

"A surprise party? Will you be inviting half the school as usual? I don't know that it will remain much of a surprise."

"No, this will be a much smaller party."

Bastion and Jaden went to collect their mail from their mailboxes. Jaden seemed to be looking to see what Bastion got, but Bastion scooped together his several envelopes and brought them with him as they went to their next class. Jaden even asked, "Didja get anything interesting?"

"I have next month's issue of Dueling Illustrated, the Compleat Water Duelist's Newsletter and one or two other things. I won a subscription to DI for finishing second in their Anagrams Contest."

As they walked to lunch, Jaden tripped and bumped into Bastion, but Bastion didn't drop any envelopes. The weather was nice enough for eating out of doors, which Bastion phrased, "al fresco," which prompted Jaden to ask if he wasn't someone who'd invented some diet soda. They ate quickly but sat on under a shady tree. Bastion was glad to take some air while he read, and Jaden dozed off.

Bastion wasn't able to read very much, even allowing for being out of doors. (Luckily he was well ahead on the subject.) He'd noticed before that Jaden tended to talk during his naps, and more than once had found Jaden's stream of subconsciousness to comprise quite an absorbing mystery. This time Jaden, who had stretched himself fully out before dropping off, seemed to be writhing about a good deal and murmuring that something was, "the pits, the pits." But if anything Jaden's expression was quite happy.

This was confusing, as Bastion was quite certain that "the pits" would be some sort of designation of disapproval. And then Jaden made a series of noises that might have been giggles or moans of pain; it was impossible to determine which. Bastion turned back to his book and tried to concentrate, and had a little success until he heard Jaden mutter something that sounded like, "...killing my feet..." Bastion looked at Jaden's feet, which seemed to be twitching about a good deal. Those cheap trainers Jaden

affected probably didn't do his feet any good. Jaden was always taking them off whenever he had half an excuse, and it looked as if he were trying to kick them off now. Bastion regarded his own top-of-the-line trainers with approval. By his calculations, they improved his dueling by 4.7%. Then he looked back at Jaden's feet, which were twitching even more violently as Jaden continued to mutter. Bastion decided he wasn't going to get any reading done, and thought he might as well open his mail. For a moment he forgot Jaden as he puzzled over the invitation to the Sacred Dueling Room he'd received for 4:15, and wondered what the mysterious offer of assistance might mean. Then Jaden muttered something that sounded like "killing" again.

Jaden's feet gave such a violent twitch that Bastion thought he might kick his trainers right off. Then Bastion noticed that the laces had been untied them before his nap, and the trainers had come about half off as Jaden had slept. It occurred to Bastion that maybe he should just ease them off for Jaden, who might stop twitching and muttering, and then it might be possible to read. Besides, he was feeling a very scientific curiosity to discover just how soundly Jaden slept.

Bastion leaned over and carefully removed Jaden's trainers. Jaden didn't wake, but something about what he was murmuring seemed happier. Bastion noticed that both of Jaden's socks had come half off with his shoes, as ill-designed hosiery so often did (unlike his own). It was probably better to remove them as well rather than try to get them back on. He pulled them off gently, and thought that Jaden seemed to be smiling.

As Bastion opened his book, he noticed that the twitching didn't seem to have lessened at all. In fact, now that Jaden's feet were bare, Bastion could see how the toes would wiggle first on one foot and then the other and then both at once before becoming still. It seemed almost as if they were feeling something, but that surely must be all subconscious. It was too bad there weren't leaves blowing about or something, as it

would be interesting to see what would happen if, say, the wind blew some leaves across Jaden's soles. That would almost surely wake him, though a few blades of grass probably wouldn't. Curiously unable to withdraw his gaze from Jaden's barefeet, Bastion found himself wondering exactly what strength of outside stimulus would be required to wake Jaden from his nap. What would happen if he actually touched Jaden's foot? He stretched a curious finger almost into contact with Jaden's sole, then withdrew it. What could he possibly say if Jaden woke up? As he stared at those feet, Bastion decided that contact with his finger probably wouldn't be enough. Maybe if he used his tongue, which came tentatively out from his mouth... then he caught himself. What on EARTH was he THINKING? Bastion returned his tongue to his mouth and clamped his lips shut just as Jaden twitched all over, muttered loudly and shook himself awake. A moment later, they heard the preliminary bell announce the start of their next class in ten minutes.

“Boy,” cried Jaden, “I must really be out of it - I don’t even remember taking my shoes off! Too bad I can’t go to class barefoot, but I’m trying to keep on Dr Crowler’s good side today.”

“Well,” replied Bastion as they prepared themselves and rose to walk to class, “you had enough of a nap just now that you ought to be able to stay awake.” As they entered the Academy building, Bastion wondered at his own impulses. It wouldn’t do even to have such ridiculous temptations, let alone yield to them. 4:15. He approved of the quarter-hour. It showed that whoever had invited him was someone who made good use of time. It was bound to be someone who could help him keep his focus. He would go.

The class only confirmed Bastion in his decision. During a lesson which was entirely familiar to him, he inexplicably found himself noticing out of the corner of his eye Jaden’s perpetually untied shoelaces. Hadn’t Jaden ever learned how to tie a proper knot? No wonder they were making self-fastening shoes. How it was Jaden didn’t trip twelve times a day Bastion was sure he couldn’t say. And again Jaden’s feet were squirming around so that the trainers were only half on, sometimes seeming about to slip entirely inside and sometimes looking about to kick them off entirely... and just then Bastion was called upon, and almost gave an incorrect answer to a fairly simple question.

Nearly making an error in class startled Bastion back to his senses. What was wrong with him? He knew better than to be distracted by Jaden’s untied shoelaces. Noticing people’s feet was so trivial, and if there was one thing Bastion was determined never to be it was trivial. 4:15 couldn’t come soon enough for him.

When 4:15 finally arrived, Bastion was ready and waiting right by the anteroom. Being fully up on the ancient dueling rituals (he’d been top of the class on the recent exam), he had his trainers removed and stored with his socks neatly tucked inside without the assistance of a robed and hooded attendant. This was a moment of slight confusion for Bastion. While he approved of following all the ancient dueling traditions, always followed them to the letter, and would secretly have allowed some of them to be quite pleasant, he always felt somewhat uneasy about being barefooted. Bare feet were so frivolous. Only following the rites and rituals laid down for the Sacred Dueling Room struck him as an acceptable excuse.

Being a great stickler for antique etiquette, Bastion even made the ritualistic bow that had not been required of duelists for the last 700 years after he entered the Sacred Dueling Room proper. He heard the digitized voice of his opponent for the first time. “Very impressive, Bastion Misawa. But I expected no less of you.”

“Did you invite me here?” Bastion asked.

“I did,” said the other, and gave the Bow of Hospitality.

“Then I take it we are to duel?”

“You are correct. I have much to offer you if you are victorious. And if the victory is mine, you can do me the honour of participating in another little entertainment. Do you accept the terms?”

Bastion replied, “I do,” and made the Obeisance of Accord.

“Then let us duel.”

As Bastion had a much more patient dueling style than Jaden, his duel began with several turns of monsters being set in defense position and a card or two set to the back row. When the battles began, Bastion took a slight lead in life points when the first important play occurred. Bastion's opponent summoned Flame Ruler, which counted for two tributes if used to summon a Fire-attribute monster, protected Flame Ruler from attack with Waboku, and then offered Flame Ruler as a tribute to bring out the Ultimate Obedient Fiend.

This play puzzled Bastion. While Ultimate Obedient Fiend had 3500 attack points, it could only attack if its controller had no other cards in hand or on the field, and his opponent had two face-down cards and three cards in hand. After some mental calculations, Bastion decided he could make a very good guess at what was coming next. And he was right. The other played Skill Drain, a Continuous Trap which negated the effects of face-up monsters and allowed Ultimate Obedient Fiend to attack.

When Bastion destroyed Skill Drain by activating the effect of Breaker the Magical Warrior, the mysterious figure equipped Ultimate Obedient Fiend with Raregold Armor to prevent Bastion from attacking other monsters. Then the voice said, "And now that you can't attack my other monsters, I'll summon one - Bowganian, which will make you lose 600 life points every turn as long as it stays on the field."

While Bastion could not immediately solve this problem, at least his opponent's strategy of not attacking allowed him to take a few hits until he could summon Mobius the Frost Monarch, with the ability to destroy up to two spell or trap cards when tribute summoned. "So I destroy Raregold Armor and your face-down card. Now, Mobius, attack Bowganian!" Though trailing with only 2200 life points to his opponent's 2700, Bastion saw he had nearly all the cards he needed for one of his favourite game-ending plays.

Bastion's next draw was just the card he wanted. He bought three turns of safety from attack by playing Swords of Revealing Light, which let him bring to the field first Oxygeddon and then Hydrogeddon. Hydrogeddon destroyed a monster in defense position, and Bastion used its effect to special summon another Hydrogeddon to the field. With only Ultimate Obedient Fiend in play, his opponent set a card face down and ended his turn, at which point Swords of Revealing Light expired.

Bastion drew his card, smiled, and declared, "And now it's time to end this duel. I activate Bonding H2O to combine my two Hydrogeddons and my Oxygeddon to form Water Dragon. And even though Water Dragon has a mere 2800 attack points, it reduces the attack strength of all Pyro-type and Fire-attribute monsters to zero, so that I can attack your Ultimate Obedient Fiend and win."

"Then in that case," replied the other, "I'd better activate my trap, Raigeki Break, which for the cost of discarding one card from my hand allows me to destroy one card on the field - your Water Dragon."

"I thought you would do that," said Bastion. "You do realize, of course, that when Water Dragon is destroyed, I can special summon Oxygeddon and two Hydrogeddons from my graveyard. And now for something you might not have expected... I have a second copy of Bonding H2O in my hand. And Water Dragon can be summoned from my hand, deck or graveyard. Rise again, Water Dragon, and attack!"

"Thank you," said the stranger, "now the duel will end. You have given me my victory."

"But how? Your monster's attack is reduced to zero, and you have no trap card on the field."

"And what card did I discard to pay the cost for Raigeki Break? Did you even notice?"

“No, I didn’t,” replied Bastion, “but what of it? Unless... you didn’t! That card is prohibited!”

“But duels in the Sacred Dueling Room don’t follow the current list of prohibitions and restrictions.” The other pulled a card from the graveyard to show Bastion. “And here it is. Makyura the Destructor, which on the turn it is sent to the graveyard lets me activate traps from my hand. And I just happen to have in hand Magic Cylinder, which negates your attack and makes you take damage equal to Water Dragon’s attack strength, which is more than enough to reduce your life points to zero. A well-fought duel, my friend.”

Bastion could have given a retort about being no friend of his opponent, but instead made the Gesture of Humility appropriate for the situation of just having lost a duel.

“That’s quite all right, Bastion. Now, if you’ll just come with me.” The stranger led Bastion through into the secret chamber. A table just the right size for Bastion had been prepared.

“Very curious,” said Bastion. “I almost have a sense of this room being some kind of laboratory in a way.”

“That’s not a bad guess. Now in a moment I’ll have you get up on the table, but first, you may find it enjoyable to select what’s inside one of these boxes as a present.”

Bastion was not in much of a mood to receive a present, but thought that it would not do to refuse the offer, as that might mean that he might miss being vouchsafed some essential information. He selected and opened a box. Then he stared at what was inside.

“But this is... a quill pen. Why are you giving me a quill pen?”

“I think you’ll know why soon enough. Now would you kindly take off your jacket and arrange yourself on this table? Yes, that’s right, through the straps. I’ll just make sure you’re quite secure... there, that seems just right. We can start now.”

“Start what? I don’t understand at all,” said Bastion.

“Well, first things first. Can you guess who I am?” asked the other.

Bastion considered for a moment. “Let me see... I have experienced a rather curious mood once or twice lately, and perhaps you’ve had something to do with that, and the only person here at Duel Academy who might be able to influence my moods would be Belowski, the Mokey Mokey duelist, and perhaps you’ve altered your style of dueling to escape detection. That’s my best guess for having no information.”

“And not a bad one, but not correct,” said the stranger. “So tell me, Bastion, are you nervous at all?”

“No,” replied Bastion. “I don’t think I’m in danger. If I were, Jaden or Zane would have appeared, and anyway I don’t have a sense that I’ve any reason to be afraid of you.”

“Fear is one thing, and nervousness is another. Some people might consider that you’re in what we might call... oh, say, a ticklish situation; would you agree?”

“Not particularly.”

“Ah. With some people one can almost see nervousness trickling into their consciousness, but I believe you. Are you ticklish, by the way, and do you notice whether other people are?”

“I’m not ticklish, at least not so far as I can tell, and I shouldn’t know about anyone else.” Interest in ticklishness was so unintellectual. But something the stranger had just said struck Bastion. The word “trickling” had been pronounced as if it contained almost three full syllables, a manner of pronunciation Bastion had never adopted for words ending in “-ling”. But quite a few people did that sort of thing; Jaden had done it quite recently... when was it... of course, at lunch! He hadn’t said, as Bastion had thought, “killing my feet,” but rather some word ending in k-l-i-n-g, Bastion consulted his mental dictionary.

The other went on, “Now I understand that you’re a great one for covering the walls of your dormitory room with dueling equations and formulas.”

“Yes, you’re quite right,” admitted Bastion. “When the walls and ceilings are full I have a painting party and paint them white again, though I’ve learned not to invite Jaden, as he gets more paint on himself.”

“Now that reminds me of something. There is a legend in this academy about a student once who was in many ways quite like Jaden, only he never failed an exam. This puzzled his professors greatly, as by all their estimates he’d have been lucky to pass a third of the time, but he never failed. Rumour had it he cheated, but noone could ever determine how. The version of the story I’ve heard is that he passed all his exams by writing cheat notes on his chest and sneaking a peek at them. I thought it might be interesting to determine if such a thing were plausible.”

“What do you mean?” asked Bastion.

“Well, since we’re here, and you selected the quill pen, and you’re so fond of writing dueling formulas, I thought I could write a few... on you. Who knows; perhaps it might come in handy for you the next time you duel Chazz or Jaden, and it shouldn’t bother you, since you’re not ticklish...”

Again Bastion was dimly aware of something. Was the phrase Jaden had muttered in his sleep actually, “tickling my feet”? Hastily Bastion told himself that he refused to think about such a thing. Ticklishness was so... unscientific. He had no time for it. Aloud he said, “Well, you’re entitled to try if you wish...”

“You’re very sensible,” said the voice with approval while opening Bastion’s button-down shirt, which he’d worn that day for a change. “Yes, it looks as if there should be enough room for a few formulas. And it’s probably a very good thing that you aren’t ticklish. That will make it much easier to write, and it will keep me from being distracted. If one of your ticklish friends were here in your place, we might have such a rib-tickling good time that I’d forget all about writing out the formulas,” the other continued, twirling the feather end of the quill on Bastion’s ribs.

An old memory rose from the depths into Bastion’s consciousness. When he’d been a little boy just learning to read, he’d found an old magazine in a box of things that had belonged to his uncle. He’d read a word or two here and there and looked at the pictures. On the back page was a section entitled RIB-TICKLING JOKES. Little Bastion had thought he’d sounded out the words right. There was a comic strip below the words. In the first box was the head of an older boy or a young man with a deep frown. In the next box, the frown became a neutral expression, which became a smirk, which became a grin, which became a giggle, which became a laugh. In the final box, in which the young

man was laughing hysterically, the cartoon explained itself as the drawing finally expanded, extending from the head of the subject down to the navel, revealing that his jersey had been raised while from one side a hand wiggled its fingers on his ribs while a second hand applied a feather to his ribs on the other side. Bastion had thought that the young man seemed happy, especially after that sad frown in the first box, but hadn't really understood the comic. He'd shown it to his father and asked about what it meant, hoping that maybe he could do that, too. Alas, his father had explained that rib-tickling was something that very silly people did to make each other laugh for no good reason. Bastion should be a good boy, forget about silly things, and go back to memorizing and learning to recite all the elements in the periodic table. And he had.

Only now, when he'd become a bit older himself, did Bastion remember all the details of that day from many years ago. He remembered the magazine and the pictures and his father's explanations all in a flash. At the same time, he felt the feather twirling gently on his own exposed ribs. He quivered slightly. It was more from the sudden connection than from anything he felt, but the stranger took notice of the quiver.

"Oh, you trembled just now," said the voice. "I suppose it's really a good thing that you aren't ticklish. If you were anyone else here, say, your friend Jaden, perhaps, I'd probably think that I'd better make a little ticklishness test, starting with something like this," brushing the feather up and down Bastion's ribs.

For an instant Bastion wasn't really aware of feeling or thinking anything. He was just starting to wonder how this mysterious stranger would know anything about whether or not Jaden was ticklish when sensations produced by the feather induced in him a curious impulse to twitch. He waved the impulse aside... then he twitched.

"Yes, twitching like that would definitely be an indication of some sensitivity. Are you absolutely SURE you're not ticklish?"

"I told you... I am not ticklish." Bastion was almost as sure of himself as he'd been earlier... he thought. He couldn't possibly be ticklish - no, of course he couldn't! Why, his father would never stand for it! As he felt the feather moving along his ribs a little more firmly, Bastion began to feel another curious impulse. If he didn't know better, he might almost think that it was an impulse to... well, he'd almost have to call it an impulse to giggle. He shut his mouth primly. Then as the feather moved a little faster Bastion twitched again, exhaled through his nose in a slight snort, and twitched more strongly.

"Now there definitely appears to be some sensitivity here. Are you sure you're not feeling the slightest impulse to laugh?"

"No..." Bastion replied, "it just makes me twitch a little."

"Good, because if I thought there were more than that, I might think I ought to do something like this," said the stranger, beginning to wiggle a few fingers where the feather had just been.

Bastion began to wriggle. It was too much effort to try to remain completely still; that was more than he could achieve. He began to feel another curious impulse, but he distrusted it. Surely he couldn't be feeling a genuine impulse to laugh. After all, he was a Misawa, and the Misawas were thoroughly serious people. They wouldn't have it any other way. None of the Misawas had ever been ticklish (well, there was his uncle, but the family hadn't seen or spoken of him for ten years or more). Being ticklish was all very well and good for people like Jaden, who didn't take life all that seriously, or for

people like Chazz, who could basically write their own ticket regarding personal eccentricities once they had achieved success in their chosen field. But Bastion had centuries of tradition to maintain. He was not ticklish. He would not laugh.

But then the fingers of both gloved hands were dancing all over his ribs. What were those gloves made of, anyway? Whatever it was produced the most curious sensations Bastion could remember ever having felt. And then the stranger went on talking, saying that this was what he - or was it she - would do after becoming suspicious that whoever was in his position might be ticklish after all, and didn't Bastion think that this would be a highly effective method of proof? Bastion didn't want to open his mouth. But when the question was repeated, he thought it better to answer quickly in the affirmative, a little half-giggle just escaping which he managed to turn into a groan.

The other responded with a burst of fast tickling that took Bastion by surprise. Bastion gave up trying to contain his wriggles. As he felt the impulse to laugh grow stronger, he admitted reluctantly to himself that he supposed it really did tickle and he must be at least somewhat ticklish. But he wasn't going to be ticklish enough to let it make him laugh. A Misawa could always rise to the challenge of adversity. Bastion allowed himself odd groans and moans as the rib-tickling continued. It gave some alleviation to the pressure mounting inside him to laugh, pressure he still felt he could contain. He moaned louder.

"Are you holding it in?" asked the stranger. "You're almost acting exactly like someone who was really very ticklish all along but didn't want to let it out. I always tell people not to suppress themselves like that. It's very bad for them. Much better just to let go and laugh, but some people just can't give in and enjoy themselves, so every now and then I really have to coax it out of them with my little chant, like so - Tickle tickle tickle; tickle tickle tickle; tickle tickle tickle-tickle-tickle," the chant began.

Bastion found this unbearable. "Please don't... mmpph... that's so... nnggh... unghh... uunnh..." He threw all his internal barricades in the way of the rising giggle, but the chanted, "tickle-tickle-tickle-tickle-tickle!!" broke down his resistance and the giggle escaped, "uh-huh-hah-huh!"

The other was quick to press this advantage. "Why you've been holding out on me, Bastion, claiming not to be ticklish and here you are giggling! I think you want to giggle some more, don't you? Tickle-tickle! I must admit, I had my doubts all along because these always looked like very ticklish ribs, and just the same way that once you began wriggling you kept it up, it's the same with your giggling. Yes, you're giggling more now because you can feel how much it tickle-tickle-tickles, can't you? Why are you still trying to hold in your laughter, Bastion? You do feel how much you want to laugh, don't you?"

Bastion did want to laugh. He couldn't believe how much he wanted to laugh. Fighting his growing urge to laugh took every last bit of all the effort he could expend, but he had to resist. As he struggled, he thought that he'd just be all right if he could keep it to an occasional giggle here and there.

The teasing increased, as did the tickling. "You're hardly in a position to fight me, Bastion. Just give in right now and laugh for me! I'm not going to stop tickling you until you do laugh, so you might as well let it out now rather than later. After all, they say laughter is good for you. And all this struggling for self-control when you're so obviously ticklish isn't doing you any good at all. And all I'm trying to do is help you give in and do what you want to do instead of what you think you ought to do. Tickle-tickle-tickle! Feel my fingers, Bastion; you can't get away from them no matter how hard you try and they're going to tickle your heartiest laughter right out of you whether you like it or not - oh, yes, I

can see very clearly you can't stop it any longer, here comes your laughter now, kitchy-kitchy-koo-ooo!!!"

That was the last straw. The silly phrase struck Bastion, who was normally immune to most humour or jokes, as being the funniest thing he'd ever heard as it penetrated the heart of his reserve like a key turning in a lock. Before he even was aware of what was happening a roar of laughter gushed forth, which might have drowned half the Academy in a tidal wave of hysteria had the whole school been there to hear it from

this implausible source. Each shriek rose in intensity and pitch from the one previous. At the end of a "WAAAAAAAAAH HAAAH HAAAAAAAAAH HAAH HAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!!!!!" that might have shattered glass, Bastion finally realized that the tickling had stopped.

The stranger had come around to stand by Bastion's head instead of his midsection. As Bastion felt his wits returning to him, he heard the digitized voice again as it said, "There now, that wasn't so hard, was it?" "But what was the purpose of all that?" asked Bastion.

"Why does there have to be a purpose? I just wanted to hear you laugh; what's the harm in that?"

"Possibly none. Bur this whole episode still seems pointless, if you ask me."

"Well, then, perhaps I can make you see the point. Or, as the case may be, feel it instead."

"Feel it? What do you mean?" Bastion was suspicious again.

"But surely," said the other, "you can't have forgotten my little story about your present. You've received the quill pen, which used to be used by nervous students to write formulae on themselves." Before continuing, the stranger paused and seemed to look around. "Excuse me for a moment." Bastion was left alone for a moment.

When the other returned, the tone in the voice seemed to suggest that a problem had been resolved. "So sorry to be called away. But not everyone is as punctual as you. Now, where were we? Yes, it was time for a little writing. Now, if you try to hold extremely still, you'll make this as easy on yourself as possible."

Having figured out during the pause what was going to happen, Bastion had prepared himself as much as possible. He braced himself to withstand the touch of the quill pen. At first he was almost able to douse any sensation whatsoever by applying himself to trying to detect what was being written on his torso. At first he just squirmed a little. But the tickling of the quill soon overcame him. Bastion was laughing again. When his shaking disturbed the progress of the pen too much, the stranger paused to tidy up the writing slowly and carefully, which tickled still more. But Bastion found that, by yielding to his laughter, he was able to remain still enough to allow the other to make progress. Just as Bastion began to feel exhausted from laughing so hard, the writing concluded.

When Bastion was breathing normally again, the other asked him, "Can you read what I wrote?"

Bastion was able to lift his head enough to see. The angle wasn't the greatest, and the writing was shaky, but he was able to make out the words. "Bastion Misawa... is a... ticklish... little... giggleboy," he recited. "What? That's what you wanted to write on me? I demand that you remove it at once!"

"Oh, dear, don't you like it? Anyway, it's true enough. Do you need a reminder?" A few quickly wiggling fingers instantly made Bastion howl.

When the tickling stopped and Bastion calmed down, he continued, “Whether or not it’s true isn’t the point. I can’t go around with a phrase like that written on me, even if it will be hidden under my uniform. Why, what if anyone were to see?” That would be the last thing he needed. It would give Chazz a big advantage to use in their series of challenge duels. And if... good grief, if Jaden ever found out, Bastion would become his number one target! In the past week, Bastion must have seen Jaden tickling Syrus at least a dozen times, and even Chazz once or twice.

“Are you worried about your friends finding out? But Bastion, you’re all in the same boat together!” The stranger then made a signal towards a part of the room Bastion couldn’t see. To Bastion’s great surprise, other tables were then wheeled out. Bastion’s eyes widened as he saw Jaden, Chazz and Syrus on the tables, each of them strapped down just as he was himself.

“What’s going on here?” cried Bastion. But the stranger said nothing as the other three tables were arranged as if they were chairs around a game of bridge.

“Hey, Bastion!” cried Jaden. “So, didja get your giggle on?”

In a moment of brilliance, Chazz, who was about to retort, “Oh, gag me!” to Jaden’s new favourite catch phrase, realized that the odds were very good that that could be arranged, and remained silent. “Uhhh... what do you mean?” Bastion asked Jaden.

“Well, you’re here, aren’t you? So you got an invitation to come here, and lost a duel to this weird stranger, and then you got tickled, didn’t you?” Jaden asked. “Don’t worry, it happened to all of us, even me!”

Syrus said, “We would have heard you from the other side of the chamber but we were late and so we’ve been in the Punishment Quarters.”

Chazz added, “And you can guess why we were late. Just ask Jaden.”

Jaden said, “But it’s true that people are saying all over school there’s a shoe thief stealing people’s shoes from their dorm rooms!”

Bastion asked, “What does that have to do with anything?”

Syrus answered, “Well, we were getting ready to come here and Chazz and I couldn’t find our shoes...”

“Because Jaden hid them under my bed!” added Chazz.

“Because everyone is saying there’s a shoe thief going around the school,” added Jaden.

“So that made you late?” Bastion inquired.

“Not exactly. You, see, we couldn’t reach our shoes because Chazz’ bed is huge and Jaden hid them all the way at the back...”

“And we had to crawl in under the bed, and then Jaden had to go and tickle our feet!”

“C’mon, guys, I couldn’t help myself the way just your legs were sticking out from under the bed. Anybody would’ve tickled your feet!”

“But you didn’t have to tickle me enough to make me hit my head!”

“And then we had to make sure Syrus hadn’t hurt himself - fat chance!”

“But Chazz and I still thought we’d better take Sy to see the nurse on our way here...”

“And my head was all right, but it made us late...”

“And we found out it was Jaden who started the rumour about a shoe thief in the first place!”

“Well, it gave me a good excuse to hide your shoes under your bed!”

“As if you really need an excuse, Jay...”

“And so we’ve had to have an extra Punishment Tickling while you were in here, thanks to Jaden...”

“C’mon, guys, don’t be mad, I said you can pay me back for it later tonight!”

The stranger finally interrupted. “The point is, you three were late, and you have had to experience a Punishment Tickling instead of listening in while Bastion was initiated. And now that you have experienced a Punishment Tickling, may I take it that you won’t be late again?”

“Again?” cried Bastion. “What exactly is the arrangement here?”

“Oh, we won’t be late again!” cried Jaden. “Even I don’t know if I could survive another Punishment Tickling!”

Chazz explained to Bastion, “We get... I mean, we have to keep coming back every week until someone figures out who this weirdo is who beat us all in a duel.”

Syrus asked, “Uhh... Chazz, are you sure you should be saying that right now when we’re probably all about to get tickled together?”

The stranger said, “Don’t worry, Syrus. I won’t be brutal just because Chazz said something; well, at least, no more brutal than usual...”

Then three robed and hooded attendants joined the stranger. Each carried a duplicate of the quill pen that had written on Bastion. The stranger then announced it was time for the contest.

Before anyone could ask what contest, each of the four students emitted a yelp of laughter as he felt a quill pen beginning to write on the sole of his bare left foot. While each young man soon shook and twitched all over as he dissolved into steady laughter, Bastion was the first to realize, as he felt the quill pen shift from one of his bare feet to the other, that the contest was to see which of the four writers could finish the foot-writing challenge first. He made a great effort to hold his barefeet still, and accordingly his writer was the first to finish, followed by Syrus’, Chazz’ and finally Jaden’s. The laughter of the four tailed off some little time afterwards, as each found the tickling enhanced by the communal experience. Gradually each of the four young men quieted down and regained his senses. Primarily for Bastion’s benefit, the stranger explained the situation and the requirement that all four return the following week at the same time. Bastion was in no condition even to hazard the wildest of guesses as to the tickler’s identity, but promised that he would give the matter his full

consideration during the week to come. After a vigorous five-minute round of foot-tickling with the feather ends of the quill pens made sure that they were more or less all laughed out for the time being, the arms of the four students were unstrapped, and they were left to get free and depart.

Bastion was the first of the four to notice what the stranger and assistants had been writing. Chazz had been placed opposite him. As Bastion reached for the last straps holding his legs, Chazz flexed his soles back enough for Bastion to make out the writing. He read on Chazz' right foot, "If you can read this message..." and on his left, "...tickle us until Chazz goes nuts!" Bastion laughed, not wanting to admit that he found the idea far more appealing than a Misawa ought to do. Chazz, about equally free from his straps, noticed that a similar message had been written on Bastion's bare soles. They both looked and saw that the same had been done to Jaden's and Syrus', which made sense. Jaden, meanwhile, had twisted his head as close to upside down as he could get it. He'd noticed the writing on Bastion's torso, and made sure to be able to read it before Bastion managed to get his shirt back on and buttoned up. Soon they all found themselves freed, dressed, and back in the anteroom resuming their footwear. As they walked back to Bastion's suite, Syrus wondered who would be tickled next. Jaden asked Bastion if he were really a ticklish little giggleboy, and they had quite a merry dispute on the question and similar parries from Bastion towards Jaden.

Once they were all safely inside Bastion's suite, their shoes customarily removed and seated closely in a circle, it was Chazz who decided to pull off his socks. He wanted to see if the message written on his feet had faded. They all agreed that it hadn't. Each of the others removed his socks as well. They decided that the messages had been written in indelible ink. Then Bastion, who was sitting very close to Jaden's bare feet, remembered lunchtime and felt the same temptation. Spurred on by the invitational message, he said sorry, he couldn't help himself and began tickling Jaden's feet. Chazz was quick to take the opportunity to grab and tickle Bastion's feet. Syrus thought of hurrying away, but felt Jaden firmly taking hold of his ankles just as he decided to be brave enough to take this opportunity to tickle Chazz. They all teased and tickled each other's barefeet in compliance with the message until they were all tickled out and paused to rest. Later, at the same instant each felt a desire to reciprocate his earlier foot-tickling, and the tickling circle re-formed in the opposite direction as the temptation overcame all of them simultaneously. When they were all convinced that none of them could laugh any more, they all collapsed, too exhausted and contented to move, and dozed off where they were, each secretly determined to be the first one to wake...