

## Get Your Giggle On

### *Part.5 : Twitching Atticus*

Atticus Rhodes didn't have time to open his mail. Stuffing the letters into the pocket of his jacket, he hurried to the graduate students' lounge. Luckily it was his sister's turn to bring lunch. As Atticus walked in, Alexis was just putting out the plate of sandwiches.

Zane took a sandwich and told Atticus, "You're just in time. We were afraid you might not be able to tear yourself away from surfing."

"It wasn't that," replied Atticus. "I think something weird is happening. I had to cover a class this morning, and that dude Bastion almost gave a wrong answer."

"Bastion?" asked Alexis. "That's really strange. I heard that he almost gave a wrong answer in class last week, too. There must be something going on with him."

Atticus agreed. "He's really the reason I was late. I ran into him on my way back from the beach, and asked him if everything was all right. But it was almost impossible to get him to say anything. And he wouldn't look me in the eye, either. He tried to a few times, but he kept looking down."

Zane opined, "That's certainly not like Bastion. He's one of the most straightforward students at the Academy."

"Come to think of it," said Alexis musingly, "Syrus hasn't been himself lately either. I was going to ask you, Zane, if you've been tutoring him again."

"I meant to, but I haven't had time lately. Why?"

"Well, he's been doing a lot of things much more competently lately. He's still basically nervous, so I know Jaden hasn't been helping him much, or at least it hasn't been working too well. But he's not making silly mistakes and getting himself all tangled up the way he usually does."

Zane couldn't think of any reason for Syrus' sudden if slight improvement in performance. But he came up with a comment of his own, "And I've noticed that Chazz has been going around smirking instead of sneering. I even heard a rumour that he went a whole day without saying anything sarcastic, but I didn't believe it. It seemed to be an exaggeration."

Atticus asked his sister, "What about your boyfriend Jaden? Has he been strange lately, too?"

"For the four thousandth time, Jaden isn't my boyfriend! I haven't even seen him for the last two weeks. There was a rumour going around that he was planning a surprise party for Chazz, but I didn't get an invitation to anything, so it must not have happened."

"I heard he ate seventeen egg sandwiches at lunch four days ago," said Zane.

"That's normal for Jaden," said Alexis. Zane agreed.

Having concluded that at least one of their undergrad friends was much as usual, the three graduate students resumed their ongoing discussion of the Rhodes' joint doctorate project. When Zane had suggested a research journal which might help the duo in their current efforts, the three started their meal.

Zane had to leave before Alexis and Atticus were finished. At the end of the meal, Alexis took charge of the dishes. She came back to find Atticus, as usual, hunting for the flip-flops he always wore to the beach. When he'd kicked them off earlier, he hadn't noticed where they'd landed.

As they each found one of the missing flips at the same time, Alexis told her brother, "You know, you wouldn't have this problem if you wore shoes you couldn't just kick off in an instant. Maybe Bastion was looking down when you talked to him because he couldn't believe your bad fashion sense."

"D'you think?" asked Atticus.

"I was joking," said Alexis.

"You may have been, but I wonder if you were right in a way. Not that Bastion's the sort of dude to care much about fashion, but he is a bit on the old-fashioned side. He might not approve of what he'd consider to be frivolous footwear."

"You may have something there." Alexis considered for a moment. Then she shook her head. "No, that sort of thing just isn't what Bastion would notice. He would disapprove if he ever paid attention, but he saves his thoughts for more important things. Why don't you wear better shoes, though, Atty?"

Atticus smiled. "Gee, sis, I gotta have my flips." He waggled a big bare foot at her. "Makes it easy for the dogs to come out and play."

"Well, that's one way of putting it. Honestly, the only person I know who goes barefoot as much as you do is Jaden. You two probably both got shorted on the civilization gene."

Atticus laughed. "No wonder you like your boyfriend Jaden so much."

Alexis was firm. "Look, for the last time, Jaden isn't my boyfriend. You know," she said as she held out his flip, "I could always toss this out the window into the dumpster."

Atticus said, "Then I'd just have to chuck the other one too."

"You probably would. But you should know I don't have a boyfriend, and be glad about it. If I did, I'd never have the time to do so much work on our project, now would I?" she asked, tossing him his flip.

"I guess you're right on that one. Catch you later!" he called as he donned his footwear and shuffled out.

Soon afterwards, Atticus opened his mail. He stared with concern at the invitation to present himself at the Sacred Dueling Room at 4:15. Hadn't he overheard some vague references in the air lately to 4:15? It was annoying only to be able to remember part of a remark, but the time sounded familiar. Atticus has a definite sense that something important was in the air. Even the time itself seemed propitious. Low tide was due for 4:08; he wouldn't miss any good surfing. As for the mysterious reference to help he needed...

Atticus rarely let on, even to his sister Alexis, but he increasingly wanted to recover all his memories from the time he'd been kidnapped and brainwashed into becoming one of the Shadow Riders. He could remember almost everything that had happened, but the more time passed, the more convinced he was that there was some missing memory that would prove vital. He'd done all he could to try to restore it, even going so far as to take up with Spirit monsters in his deck. Though there had been some progress, the great desired breakthrough remained elusive. But the Sacred Dueling Room was such a spiritual place that Atticus had high hopes his visit there would take him farther in his quest to recollect everything.

Accordingly 4:15 arrived to find Atticus entering the Sacred Dueling Room. Kicking off his flips in the ante-chamber, he strode into the Sacred Dueling Room proper with an air of confidence. The sight of the robed and hooded stranger did not seem to give him pause. Atticus addressed the other, "So you're the mysterious stranger who will give me the assistance I need? What's the catch?"

"It's a simple proposition," replied the other. "If you defeat me in a duel, I assist you. If not, you assist me."

"And how would I do that, exactly?"

"Well, that's for me to know and you to find out, isn't it? I can assure you, though, that it's nothing difficult or dangerous in any way. You might even consider it fun."

Atticus had an eerie sense that the stranger was being truthful with him. Also, he felt that here might be the challenge he'd been, not seeking, but waiting for it to present itself to him. After his quick agreement to the stranger's proposal, the two prepared themselves to duel.

Atticus was pleased with his opening hand, which contained Gear Golem the Moving Fortress and three Spirit monsters. With Gear Golem's 2200 defence points, he probably would not have to worry about his Spirit monsters returning to his hand at the end of the turn they were summoned. He set his Gear Golem and one trap card. He planned to attack directly with his Spirit monster Inaba White Rabbit next turn.

The other considered for a moment, then decided to use Nobleman of Crossout to remove Atticus' monster from play, remarking that it was a shame it wasn't a flip effect monster or Sangan. Atticus laughed. "Sangan? Dude, nobody plays Sangan face down any more - oh, sorry, if you are a dude, I should have said." There came no answer or any kind of sign. The stranger concluded the turn with two face-down cards and a monster in defence position.

Atticus drew his card and smiled. "Two face-down cards? Now I get card advantage by playing Harpie's Feather Duster to destroy them both!" The other activated both destroyed cards in a chain, first Scapegoat, then Time Seal. Atticus was surprised by Time Seal, which meant he would lose his next draw phase, but smiled as the four Goat Tokens filled the remaining slots in his opponent's monster zone.

"So, you've got a full field. But now it's time for my trap card - Windstorm of Etaqua! This will put all your Goat Tokens into attack mode - and they have zero attack points. Now you might think I'll attack one and you can change the rest during your next turn, but you won't have the chance because of this - Asura Priest!"

Atticus' Spirit monster appeared on the field, armed with 1700 attack points and the ability to attack each opposing monster on the field. Atticus quickly ordered Asura Priest to attack each of the Goat Tokens. The stranger's life points dropped from 8000 to 1200. "Too bad I didn't include any power-boosting Equip Spells in this deck," Atticus remarked, "then I'd have done more than 8000 damage. Now, should I attack your last monster? It might have a high defence strength, but with a big lead in life points I can afford it. And I'd rather know what might be coming next turn when my field is empty.

Asura Priest attacked the face-down monster. It turned out to be the flip effect monster, A Cat of Ill Omen. The stranger selected the trap card Last Turn! to be placed on top of the deck. Atticus told himself, "He can only activate that trap card if he has 1000 life points or less. Luckily my Asura Priest comes back to my hand, so the field will be empty. I'll just make sure I can do 1200 points of damage with my next attack." Atticus ended his turn, and Asura Priest returned to his hand.

The stranger drew. "Well, since you know I drew Last Turn! I might as well set it on the field now. And to get my life points down below 1000, I think I'll pay 800 points to use Premature Burial and bring A Cat of Ill Omen back from the graveyard. But the cat won't stay long, because I'll tribute it to summon Vanity's Fiend!"

Atticus stared at one of the newest monsters in the game, with 2400 attack points and the effect that, while it remained on the field, neither player could special summon any monsters. This would ordinarily not be a problem. But he knew exactly what would happen. On his next turn, the stranger, whose life points were down to 400, would activate Last Turn! Every card except Vanity's Fiend on the field and in both players'

hands would be sent to the graveyard. One monster from Atticus' deck could be special summoned for a special battle with Vanity's Fiend, but the effect of Vanity's Fiend would prevent the special summon, just as, in past times, the monster Jowgen the Spiritualist had done. While Atticus would lose no life points from the battle, the rules for Last Turn! stipulated that the player with a monster on the field at the end of the turn won the duel. If Atticus could somehow get a monster onto the field by a normal summon, he could

claim a draw, but none of the cards he held could help him when they went to the graveyard. He couldn't even draw the card he needed, due to losing his draw phase because of Time Seal. Reluctantly, Atticus informed his opponent that he surrendered, there being no way to avoid defeat.

Atticus felt no sense of trepidation as he was led into the Secret Chamber. Even the experience of being strapped onto a table was not particularly daunting. The entire day felt as if it were some integral part of his destiny. Surely something would be learned at the end of the experience. Would his life change? Possibly, but he didn't sense that to be the main point of whatever was happening.

When the stranger gave Atticus his present, it turned out to be something a little confusing. Atticus puzzled over it for a bit. "It looks like a sort of double-handed back scratcher," he ventured to guess at last.

"You are correct," came the reply, "it has been modified to serve another purpose. You may notice there's a little button here as well as there being two hands, as it were. It allows the device to be operated automatically. We can even adjust the total reach."

"Not bad," said Atticus. "It might be nice to be able to scratch two different spots at once. Too bad you strapped me here on my back, or we could try it out."

“Oh, but we can anyway.”

“Are you gonna turn me over?”

“That won’t be necessary. We’ll be trying it out on your sides, not your back.”

“My sides? Isn’t it a back scratcher?”

“Not exactly. Now I just have to attach it here... like so... and now I can start it.” The stranger had attached the odd device to Atticus’ stomach. The two “hands” were positioned right at his sides. Then the device was activated.

Atticus thought he’d jump out of his skin if he could move. All he could do was writhe about a bit, but he did so for all he was worth. Once he was sufficiently over the initial surprise and shock, he blurted out, “Uh, I gotta say... dude, that like, you know, tickles!” He began to giggle.

The stranger’s earlier victims all heard the beginning of Atticus’ torture from elsewhere in the Secret Chamber. Chazz rolled his eyes. “Like he couldn’t see that coming?” he asked. “He’s supposed to be training for a degree here.”

“Well, none of us did, you know,” replied Bastion. He was still eagerly trying to run through all the possibilities for the identity of the mysterious stranger in his mind. By now he ought to have a clue who this person was. It was simply a matter of making the right logical deductions. Did he dare admit to himself that it was just possible he didn’t entirely want to do so?

“Wow!” exclaimed Jaden. “Alexis never told us Atticus was so ticklish! Whod’ve guessed?”

Syrus was able to tell Jaden, “He is her big brother, after all, Jay. A younger sibling wouldn’t necessarily be the most likely person to know about an older brother being ticklish or not.”

Bastion was too busy deliberating to pick up on it, and Chazz had enough sense not to describe the tickle-fights he’d seen his brothers having when they’d gotten bored with tickling him. Instead, Chazz simply commented that Jaden never had an older brother, not like Alexis... or Syrus...

Jaden, as always, took the bait. “Uh, Syrus, is there, like, something you could tell us about Zane?”

Syrus sighed. “Zane? Don’t even think about it, Jaden. Zane is absolutely not ticklish. I’ve seen a couple of people try to tickle him and he’s never responded at all, not even flinched.”

Meanwhile, Atticus was having the laugh of his life. Bucking involuntarily, he was completely incapable of escaping the tickling sensations. But he didn’t fight the impulse to laugh any more than he could help. Once he got a steady laugh going, he almost felt as if he were being taken out of himself. Atticus completely surrendered himself to the tickling as much as he could, laughing harder and deeper until finally a coughing fit fought its way up through him. All the while the curious device remained attached to his stomach as if glued there, despite all his involuntary bucking. The stranger removed the tickling device.

As Atticus came back to himself, almost saddened to lose the sense of being taken completely out of himself that he’d experienced during the intense tickling, the stranger’s attendants wheeled out the

other four boys, strapped in on their tables. Eventually Atticus was able to take in the scene. “Hey, guys,” he said, “how did you all come to be here?”

“The same way you did, what did you think?” snapped Chazz. Jaden, Syrus and Bastion confirmed this.

The stranger explained to Atticus, “Everyone who duels me and loses comes back to be tickled each week until someone defeats me or guesses my identity. Care to have a go?”

Atticus pondered. “I don’t really think you’re my sister, but Alexis is the only person I can think of who’d want to get me into such a situation. Unless of course you’re the head of the Shadow Riders?” The other confirmed that the guess was wrong.

“And now that we’ve proved these little tickling devices can work when attached to the body of the victim, we’ll see how they do standing free.” On each table a device was affixed near the bare feet of one of the boys. At a signal from the stranger, the devices were started. Soon all five boys shook with laughter as the tickling mechanical hands ranged all over their sensitive barefeet.

Syrus’ laugh was tinged with resignation, the laugh of an eternal victim used to the receiving end. Chazz struggled instinctively, the laughter he was trying to withhold being forced out of him just as his brothers had done for years. Jaden laughed with delight, happy to get his giggle on. Bastion’s laughter was confused, his bare feet’s surprising enjoyment of the situation clashing with his sense of propriety and correct dueling technique. Atticus’ laughter, which quickly became as hearty as it had been, kept a nearly spiritual quality, as if he were being taken out of himself by the tickling. All ten of the boys’ bare feet writhed and wriggled helplessly, but the tickling and their laughter just intensified.

Eventually, the stranger decided that the boys were about to laugh themselves hoarse, and the tickling was halted for the day. After Atticus confirmed that he would return the following week and see to it that all the others did so as well, the group was released. They filed out through the Sacred Dueling Room and back into the antechamber to collect their things.

Slipping his feet into his flip-flops, Atticus noticed all the others looking slightly unwilling to don their trainers and boots. On the way back to campus, he said they should all wear flips like his. Reminded that it was against the dress code, Atticus said he could probably figure out some way around that. Jaden agreed that it would make it easier to have toe-tickling duels in class to stay awake, and Atticus added that it would be so much easier for them to kick off their shoes, as he demonstrated, Chazz and Bastion both just missing being hit. The others then played keep-away with Atticus’ flips, tossing them back and forth until Atticus chased them down one after the other and tickled each one until none of the other four could run any more and Bastion, the last one caught, had to return the flip-flops. Chazz was just whispering to Jaden that they were 4-on-1, but the bell announcing dinner in ten minutes sounded and they had to hurry back, though a surprise rendezvous was arranged by the other four for the next time Atticus went surfing at the beach...