

Get Your Giggle On

Part.6 : Tittering Ty

During the week that followed the dueling defeat and tickling initiation of Atticus, many new students arrived at Duel Academy. Shortly before the arrival of the newcomers, Zane and Alexis met by chance when their paths on separate meditative walks happened to intersect. Taking their meeting as a sign that each had walked far enough for one day, they returned to the Academy together, discussing a number of strange and potentially disturbing things as they walked.

Alexis explained, "I usually go for a walk when I'm worried about Atticus. He keeps developing these weird enthusiasms, and it worries me. This time, he's come up with some secret training technique that's supposed to make people into much better duelists."

"I think I remember the last idea like that he had," replied Zane. "His ideas might not be so bad if he didn't get a bunch of other people interested in them as well and then lose interest in a few weeks."

"But what worries me now is that he's being incredibly secretive. Most of the time he never stops talking about his latest idea. This time he's not saying a word. I hope he's not getting into another cult thing like the Shadow Riders. Maybe you should duel him just to make sure he isn't being possessed by an evil spirit trying to take over the world."

"I might if it comes to that. Of course you're not the only one with a troublesome brother."

"What's gotten into Syrus now?" asked Alexis.

Zane sighed. "I don't know. I thought he'd be calmer by now. But he's fifty times more jumpy than he ever was, and his nerves are getting to me. I'd tutor him myself if that didn't make him worse than anything. Yesterday was beyond belief. We were on our way to have dinner together, and we just heard someone laughing, and Syrus turned about seven different colours."

"There was a rumour going around for a few days after his birthday that Syrus might be in love," Alexis said slowly, "but I think that died out. He's a little too devoted still to Dark Magician Girl to have room for any kind of crush on a flesh-and-blood human. The only weird rumour going around now that I can think of is one about some friend of Jasmine's or Mindy's seeing Bastion buying a pair of flip-flops at the store."

"Bastion? That's hard to believe." Zane shook his head. "He never thinks about anything but dueling, and I know he's told me at least four times about his calculations that his superior brand of trainers improving his dueling by 4.7%. But not everything is a rumour. Do you want to hear the most disturbing thing yet? And this isn't a rumour. I heard it with my own ears. It's Chazz. This morning, I heard him say, Please. TWICE, believe it or not."

"Twice?" Alexis stared. "You're right, Zane, that's the weirdest thing of all. Something funny is going on around here. If I didn't have to get ready for a new student tutorial group, I'd poke around and see if I could find out anything."

“That’s all right. You know what this place is like. Nothing stays secret for very long. Besides, whatever’s happen is bound to involve Jaden sooner or later, and the one thing Jaden isn’t is discreet.”

“You’re right there. If Jaden ever keeps a secret, then we’ll know there’s really something strange going on.”

As Alexis said this, she and Zane had arrived at a good vantage point for witnessing the arrival of the new students. The new girls didn’t look terribly promising. Alexis remarked that they all looked more like good subjects for Jasmine and Mindy to tutor, and that she would probably be assigned the biggest shopping addicts of the bunch. At first, the boys did not seem a much better lot. But two of them drew the attention of the observant pair.

One of the two new arrivals wore an exceptionally neat and fashionable grey (silver?)suit. Alexis remarked that he seemed to be in training to be the next James Bond or something of the sort. Zane recognized him as Aster Phoenix, the newest phenomenon on the dueling circuit for the current season. Apparently it had been quite a coup for Dr Crowler to get Aster to enroll at Duel Academy, where he would be conducting the several student-led seminars that were a prerequisite for joining the professional dueling tour.

Zane’s attention was drawn to an apparent misfit. He told Alexis he wondered if somebody hadn’t missed the plane to military school. Alexis agreed at once. The boy in question had the physique of a soldier who’d gone through boot camp several times, and wore fatigues that appeared to testify to the experience. Alexis suggested, and Zane agreed, that he looked like a natural leader. Zane took out his list of the new arrivals. After scanning the headshots interspersed among the names and statistics of the new students, Alexis read out that this boy was named Tyranno Hasselberry, and that he’d come from a military school background. They surmised that the name Tyranno might account for his choice of headgear, which reminded Alexis of the dinosaur helmet Atticus had worn when he’d been six years old.

Zane and Alexis soon moved away and went on with their appointed tasks. For the next day or two, neither of the pair had the opportunity to witness any additional unusual behaviour from any of their friends. The same could not be said of one of the newcomers who had drawn their notice.

Tyranno Hasselberry was not quite sure what to make of his first few days at Duel Academy. He’d expected something rather more regimented. And disappointment seemed part of the mix for him. He’d expected to be quartered in Obelisk Blue, but was directed, as he put it, to the Ra Yellow barracks. The uniform didn’t suit him, but he managed to make the best of it with a few alterations, mainly ripping off the sleeves. He also decided to risk declining to wear the regulation trainers issued to him that matched the jacket. This was a slightly risky undertaking, for which he’d prepared with the not-entirely-true claim that he required his custom-made combat boots for their quality of arch support. Truthfully, he just thought that his huge boots made his already-much-larger-than-average feet an intimidating sight indeed, the sort of thing that might easily give him an advantage in confrontation with a stranger. But noone seemed inclined to question him on the subject. Dr Crowler, whom Ty met briefly shortly after arrival, was the only faculty member inclined to inquire into the situation. Apparently thinking the new recruit likely to be eligible for early promotion to Obelisk Blue, the persnickety doctor chose to confide that arch support was crucial in a good pair of shoes and he would of course grant such a promising new student a medical exemption.

With the military precision of his dueling and his natural leadership, it did not take Ty long to amass a small squadron of followers. By the end of his first day he thought he might be able to make a respectable troop of them. Early in his second day, he suffered his first defeat in a duel against Jaden. This made a great impression on Ty, who became immediately fascinated with his friendly but undisciplined conqueror, whose style was the antithesis of Ty's own. How could anyone who dueled in such a wing-and-a-prayer manner have any lasting dueling success? Now someone like Zane Truesdale Ty could look up to and strive to emulate. But this Jaden was apparently another of the top duelists at the Academy.

That afternoon, as Ty was walking along puzzling over Jaden and other mysteries of Duel Academy, he spotted another interesting personage at a distance. This was someone clearly as used to being sartorially outstanding in his own way as Ty was in his. Their ways were vastly divergent. But even from a distance and not knowing that the trench coat was silk and the jumper cashmere Ty instinctively guessed that this student was Expensively Dressed. As the other approached this impression grew stronger; the outfit screamed money from the tip of the turned-up collar all the way down to the... flip-flops?

Ty started, mis-stepped, and stumbled into the stranger. As he tried to avoid tripping, his hand clutched at the other for support. Though he didn't notice it at the time, the well-dressed student flinched much more violently than one would have expected from such casual contact. The verbal barrage Ty encountered left him unable to notice much else.

"Why can't you watch where you're going? And keep your hands off the wardrobe. Do you know how much this coat costs?"

"I'm truly sorry. I was just startled for the moment," Ty apologized. "And I recognize the coat. My cousin helped design it." No need to mention that said cousin, being the only non-military member, was the family black sheep.

"Really?" The other boy seemed interested, and became more gracious. "Well, I'm sure it was an accident; no one like you would paw Chazz Princeton deliberately. I take it you're new here, so I'll just advise you to pay more attention to where you're walking."

"Oh, I rarely stumble. I was just surprised to see..." Ty broke off.

"Surprised? To see a designer trench coat? Weren't you looking at something else?" asked Chazz.

"Well... yes..." Ty began to admit, "I was just wondering why..." and seeing Chazz beginning to look impatient, he hurried on, "why you'd be wearing flip-flops. They don't go with your outfit and I'm sure the commanders here at the school don't approve of them with the uniform..."

"Oh," Chazz said quickly. "Well, these are actually designer flip-flops, and I only wear them on very special occasions. Now I have to be somewhere, so you just be more careful, okay?" Chazz hurried away.

Ty watched Chazz for a moment, puzzling. Then he went on his way. A few minutes later, he saw Syrus coming in his direction. When Sy began coming into focus, Ty sensed there was something different about him. Had he cut his hair, or changed the style of his glasses? Ty had advised him to do both within fifteen minutes of making his acquaintance. But that wasn't it.

Ty soon picked up on the difference. When Syrus was near enough that it was clearly not just a trick of distance, it was clear that his feet looked much smaller than usual. Instead of his usual double-oversized trainers, Syrus was wearing flip-flops, just like Chazz. Ty called out to him.

“Hey, there, soldier! You look like you’re in a hurry; are you?”

“A hurry?” Syrus was never the best at covering up, despite his long years of practice. “Um, I’m not in any hurry, I guess... I mean, I am going somewhere... but I’m not hurrying. Not more than usual, at least... I mean...” Syrus broke off.

“Well, if you’re sure. You know, I almost didn’t recognize coming along just now.”

“You didn’t? I look just the same as usual... don’t I?”

Ty grinned. “Well, almost. You still ought to change your hair and your glasses. But I think I’d better give you another piece of advice, soldier.”

“Um... okay,” Syrus said nervously, shifting about from foot to foot.

“You see, I couldn’t help but notice that you’re wearing flip-flops.”

“You did? I don’t think anyone noticed. People usually don’t notice me,” sighed Syrus.

“Well, I have an eagle eye for detecting when anyone’s out of uniform. And I gotta tell ya, Syrus, flip-flops are definitely not a good idea for someone like you. Why, do you know what would happen if you showed up at my barracks like that?”

“N-no, what?”

“Well, the minute my men got an eyeful of those flip-flops, they’d get them right off you and tickle those cute little barefeet o’ yours into the middle of next week...” Ty began to explain, breaking off when he saw Syrus gasp and change colour.

Syrus turned red, then white, then pink. “Wh.why would they do that?” he asked, his eyes wide with what seemed to Ty an expression of something almost equally like to fascination as panic.

“It’s a question of authority, soldier. I thought you understood this because usually you go around in those oversized tainers that make your feet look as big as a normal person’s. But now here you are showing off how tiny your feet really are. They’re cute little feet, and that’s all well and good at the right time and in the right place, but if you want to be a champion duelist, you need to show a sense of authority. And you can take it from me that no soldier worth his salt is going to quake in fear in the presence of anyone with such cute little ticklish-looking feet. So why in tarnation are you wearing those flip-flops anyway?”

Syrus ducked the question, mumbling something incoherent. Then he asked, “Is that why you wear those big black boots? They are pretty intimidating.”

“Thanks, Syrus. I’m told they help me to look confident, as if I always know what I’m doing and why.”

“I wish I did,” sighed Syrus.

“Then don’t walk around in flip-flops! I’m surprised half the school hasn’t tickled you already today.”

Syrus changed colour again, then muttered that he’d be late, then hurried away. Ty began walking again, in the opposite direction to that in which Syrus had gone. A moment later, he stopped. He turned and looked the other way, thinking for a moment, then decided to see if he could track where Syrus was going. Why not? Seeing Chazz and Syrus both wearing flip-flops struck Ty as odd. Jaden and Syrus might if they were going to the beach, or if Jaden had forgotten to do their laundry, but Chazz and Syrus were an odd combination. They would not be likely to be doing anything together. Just what was going on?

Ty set out to follow Syrus’ trail. It was not especially difficult. Here and there were clear marks of the small footwear. Syrus had not taken many turns, though he had evidently been hurrying. Ty congratulated himself for having taken that Scouting course in following trails. Eventually he came to what appeared to be the approach to a beach.

It seemed a peaceful niche amidst the bustle of Duel Academy. Looking around him, Ty noticed that Syrus’ path had intersected with someone else’s. The other trail seemed to be made by flip-flops as well. Could Chazz and Syrus be meeting out here? Then Ty saw that there were other trails as well, and a variety of footprints. He was sure several people had passed that way. And then he thought he heard something. As he followed the trail further, he was sure he could hear a voice, no, two voices. He couldn’t tell what they were saying, and he didn’t think either voice belonged to Chazz or Syrus. Then Ty recognized the sound to be laughter, or thought he did. Was someone, or were two people, really laughing? And why? He’d find out soon enough. He would be able to see where the noise was coming from in another minute when...

“MR HASSELBERRY!” boomed out a voice from behind him. Turning around, Ty saw Dr Crowler leaning against a tree, a bullhorn dangling from his other hand, panting. Ty hurried back.

“Now what... have you... been doing out here?” panted Dr Crowler. “I’ve had people looking for you all over campus,” he went on, recovering his breath, “and finally came to find you myself. I wanted you to attend a little meeting I’m having of some of the top new duelists. I’m afraid we’ll have to hurry back, as it’s due to start in fifteen minutes, but we can ride in my golf cart. Come along quickly now.” Dr Crowler led Ty back in the opposite direction. Ty, instinctively realizing that he probably wanted to return to the area later to see what had been going on and that it might be just as well for the school authorities to know nothing about whatever it was, meekly acquiesced.

Throughout the whole meeting, Ty’s mind was absent. He was able to put up a perfectly good appearance of paying attention to all the goals for the term that were being set out for the top new students. Even Dr Crowler, who usually could tell when someone was paying him less than full attention, seemed to notice nothing amiss. The whole time, he tried to work out exactly whose laughter he’d heard, and what could have been happening. Would the activity still be going on by whatever time he could manage to return?

After the meeting, Ty was unable to get away at once as he’d hoped to be able to do. By the time he set out, he thought he should still be able to get back to that meeting place in time. However, as he and Dr Crowler had ridden back mostly on pavement, it wasn’t quite as easy as tracking Syrus had been, especially as he was starting from a part of campus he hadn’t yet memorized quite so well. After a couple of wrong turns, Ty realized that whatever had been happening was sure to have

finished. But on reaching the place where Syrus' tracks had met those of several others, he decided at least to see where the trail ended.

The trail seemed to end just past a sand dune. There was quite a lot of sand, but as some formidable rocks lay between the sand and the water, Ty assumed the area was not popular as a beach. But there had definitely been several people there in the recent past. The sand had been dug about in several places, and there were numerous footprints. There were marks from Syrus' flip-flops, at least two or three other pairs, and, Ty discovered, quite a few prints of bare feet. Well, that made sense in such a sandy place. He'd probably have the dickens of a time getting all the sand out of his boots when he got back to campus. After vaguely searching for any more clues, Ty decided he'd learned all he could of this mysterious place and made his way back to his dorm.

The next day, on a different schedule, Ty kept as sharp a lookout as he could. At a couple of different times, he wandered over to where he'd met Chazz and Syrus the day before, but never spied anyone either heading out towards the cove or sporting any suspicious-looking footwear. Should he perhaps just return to the mysterious cove, if he could find it again?

Just then Ty spied two guys coming from the general direction of the cove. And sure as anything, they were both wearing flip-flops! One of the pair Ty didn't recognize. He knew the other, though the name didn't quite come to him right away. While Ty tried to remember who the other was, the pair seemed to bid each other good-bye and the one he didn't recognize went off in a different direction. The one he did was soon quite close to him.

Ty was quick to greet him. "Hi, there. Now I know who you are, don't tell me, you're... your name starts with an M, I think."

"That's right. Misawa. Bastion Misawa. And you're Tyranno Hasselberry, aren't you?"

"Why, how in tarnation did you know that? I've heard all about you, you know, that you have the best grades of any student of your year."

"And I've heard that you're one of our most talented new students. Greetings. Are you enjoying getting familiar with Duel Academy?"

"It's a swell place. I hope I can live up to such a good reputation."

"I'm sure you can. Dr Crowler may be a bit on the original side, but he's hardly the person to lavish praise on an undeserving individual."

"Why, thank you, Bastion." Ty offered his hand, which Bastion shook. Then Ty took the plunge and asked, "Bastion, could I ask you something?"

"Of course." Bastion was all obliging politeness.

"I hope this isn't embarrassing, and you have every right to tell me it's none of my business, but I'm a little curious about something. You see, someone with your grades would be the last sort of person I'd expect to see out of uniform. And I've heard about your claim that your special trainers improve your dueling, so why, if you don't mind my asking, are you walking around in flip-flops?"

Bastion smiled, concealing a little nervousness. "Oh, I don't mind the question. Actually, it's a new experimental technique for improving one's dueling. It's similar to the principle of speaking in public wearing only underwear. The idea is to accustom oneself to doing something out of one's comfort zone, so that one can be prepared for anything unexpected that might occur during a real duel. It's a relatively new technique, but so far I think it's working well. I just want to make it back to my room quickly before too

many people see me wandering about like this. Would you mind if we kept walking?"

"Not at all, and thanks for telling me. So that really has done you some good? Whose idea is it? I never heard of something like that before."

"I think it's brand new. Atticus Rhodes thought of it. You may have seen me with him just now. He and his sister Alexis are doing postgraduate work here."

"Of course." Ty gave Bastion a wry smile. "I don't know about trying that myself, though."

Bastion looked down studiously. "Well, I think your choice of footwear suits you quite well. It definitely goes with what I've heard of your style - very big and bold and aggressive."

"Well, I suppose I do like to duel aggressively," Ty admitted. "Some people think that's why I use a Dinosaur deck to duel. Of course, some people think my liking Dinosaurs is why I'm aggressive."

"Well, those are certainly very... large... boots," Bastion said slowly.

"Comfortable, too, for the most part. You can't have soldiers marching around with blisters. They just get a bit warm in hot weather sometimes, but I'm fine if I just remember to let my feet get enough air. Would you like me to help you get a pair cheap?"

Bastion blushed slightly. "Oh, no, thank you. I don't think they would suit me much." The two of them had increased their pace, and had arrived back at the Ra Yellow dormitory. Ty invited Bastion to his room.

Accepting out of politeness, Bastion commented on the military theme with which Ty had redecorated. Struggling out of his big boots, Ty commented, "Oh, I can always make any new place feel like home. It isn't much really." As he finally got his boots off and put up his feet, Ty sighed with satisfaction. "That's better! I didn't realize how far I'd walked today - and yesterday too. Sam Hill! I bet I haven't walked that much since the time my friends and I hiked all the way back to school from our campout." Flexing his soles, Ty went on to explain, "I was so worn out my friends tickled my feet for an hour just to rejuvenate me."

"Did they really?" asked Bastion, blushing.

Ty looked at him with what he thought was comprehension. "I know; it doesn't seem military, does it. But my friends and I used to practise withstanding tickle torture in case we ever got captured by unscrupulous enemies. We did it all the time. Whoever was gonna get tickled would hide a twenty dollar bill and then everyone else in the group would try to tickle him into telling where he hid it. I suppose we got to be expert ticklers after a while. And we discovered which tickles were practically torture and which were good for giving guys energy. You'd be amazed how refreshing the right tickle

could be.” Seeing that Bastion’s attention was riveted, Ty said, “Y’know, Bastion, your own feet look a bit worn from all that walking around in flip-flops. Wanna try a little rejuvenating tickle? We could take turns.”

But this was a bit much for Bastion. As tempting as the idea was, he could hardly start getting into tickle matches with people he hardly knew. He hadn’t entirely reconciled himself to having joined Atticus’ special club. Making the best excuse he could think of on the spur of the moment (not, admittedly, very good), he fled to his own room.

Ty watched in surprise as Bastion scurried away. He’d have sworn that Bastion might be his most promising potential comrade yet (if not Jaden). The guy had DEFINITELY been checking out his feet. Maybe he’d been too quick to talk about his old friends and their military tickle parties. He was dispirited for the rest of the day. Even the sight of someone whom he could have sworn to be Jaden some distance away and apparently wearing flip-flops didn’t move him.

The next day Ty received The Letter. If he would present himself at the Sacred Dueling Room at 4:15, he might receive the assistance he needed. Presumably that referred to help fitting in. He wasn’t always sure he was doing too badly - Syrus and Bastion had definitely seemed like good prospects. Or... who knew... maybe he was doing even better than he thought? Supposing, just supposing, this Atticus and his little group of flip-flop wearers had gotten their heads together and were planning some sort of initiation? Sam Hill! This would be just the way to go about it - lure him to some remote part of campus and then initiate him into their group. He’d better be sure to use his special foot powder just in case. Ty sensed the likelihood of a tickling party in the near future.

Happily for Ty, he recalled more of Dr Crowler’s interminable babblings than he’d realized. After reading The Letter, he was about to plan how to discover the location of the Secret Dueling Room without drawing undue attention to himself. Then he realized that Dr Crowler had told all the promising new students all about the place. Ty didn’t recall much of what the old fool had said, but he could at least recall the location. With due military promptness, he presented himself right on time at 1615 hours.

Just as Ty was about to stride through the antechamber right into the Sacred Dueling Room, he felt almost as if he were being pulled back by an invisible hand. Then a voice seemed to appear in his head without his having heard it. “Your footwear,” the voice said, “please remove it. Bare feet are required in the Sacred Dueling Room.” Recalling something to that effect having been uttered by Dr Crowler, Ty yanked off his boots and socks as quickly as possible. Then he entered the important chamber a little apprehensively.

The same robed and hooded figure who had previously dueled and defeated Syrus, Chazz, Jaden, Bastion and Atticus stood on the far end of the room. In their usual positions, the previous victims heard rumblings announcing that yet another student had been lured to the Sacred Dueling Room. “Who’s the new guy, I wonder?” asked Syrus.

“Does it matter? If none of us could beat that freak, then whoever it is doesn’t stand a chance,” snarled Chazz.

Jaden said, “Well, the freaky dude is an awesome duelist. If he is a dude. I wonder how he’s going to win this one.”

Bastion speculated, "Given his - or her - penchant for using a different sort of deck every time, I wonder if he - or she - might be up to something sneaky, like Exchange of the Spirit, or possibly Destiny Board."

Atticus said, "I just hope our new friend has his own flip-flops." Then they all heard the stranger repeating the terms of the duel, and the new challenger accepting them. "Wait a minute," said Atticus, "I know who that is. He's that new student; I've spoken to him, what's his name..."

"Oh, right," cried Jaden, "Huckleberry! Or something like that. He uses Dinosaur cards. The guy's not a bad duelist."

"And he uses Dinosaurs?" asked Chazz. "Please, they went out with the Ark..."

"Technically, no, Chazz..." Bastion began to explain, but just then the duel began, and they all quieted down in order to listen.

Ty had been thinking to himself that perhaps he could use his being relatively unknown at Duel Academy to his advantage. He could pretend to be a fairly mediocre duelist and then spring a strong move on his unknown opponent. "I'll put one card face down and play Black Ptera in attack mode." As Black Ptera had only 1000 attack points, Ty hoped that his move would be taken as a crude bluff.

The stranger played Mystical Space Typhoon to destroy Ty's trap card Sakuretsu Armor, then summoned Zombyra the Dark to destroy Black Ptera in battle. Ty's life points dropped to 6900. Zombyra's attack power dropped from 2100 to 1900. The stranger ended by playing three cards face down.

Three face down cards? Ty thought to himself that that was pretty risky. As he happened to draw Heavy Storm, he'd be getting a big card advantage. He played Heavy Storm, destroying the stranger's Mirror Force, Magic Cylinder, and Enemy Controller. He smiled. "Well, now that I've gotten some of your best defensive cards out of the way, I'll play my Mausoleum of the Emperor so that, for only 2000 life points, I can summon my strongest monster, Super Conductor Tyranno. This bad boy's got 3300 attack points, so I'm getting most of my investment back right away by attacking your monster."

Super Conductor Tyranno destroyed Zombyra the Dark, although the stranger still led in life points by a score of 6600-4900. Ty ended his turn by putting a card face down. That way he'd be ready for anything his opponent might do to destroy his monster.

With only one card in hand, the stranger seemed pleased by the draw. "I'll start with the last card I had in my hand - Giant Rat." Ty was relieved; Giant Rat had only 1400 attack points. "And now for the card I drew - Megamorph!" Ty was even more relieved. As his opponent's life points were higher, any monster to which Megamorph were attached would have its attack points cut in half instead of doubled. Why was the stranger even playing Megamorph at all when it couldn't help Giant Rat?

"Of course," the other went on, "I won't equip Megamorph to my monster but to yours." Now Ty understood - his dino's attack power was reduced to 1650. Then the other attacked Super Conductor Tyranno with Giant Rat. Giant Rat was destroyed and the stranger's life points were reduced to 6350.

Ty knew that Giant Rat, having been destroyed in battle, would allow his opponent to special summon an Earth-attribute monster from the deck. But the monster could have a maximum of 1500

attack points. Possibly the stranger would summon Injection Fairy Lily, and pay 2000 life points to increase Lily's attack from 400 to 3400. To Ty's surprise, the new monster was another Giant Rat, which also attacked Super Conductor Tyranno.

Ty could only conclude that the other wanted to thin out a bunch of monsters from the deck by this weird play. As the stranger's life points continued to drop, the second Giant Rat fetched a third and last Giant Rat. When that monster was destroyed, the stranger special summoned Warrior Lady of the Wasteland, a weaker version of Giant Rat, with 1200 attack points, and only able to special summon Earth-attribute Warrior-types when destroyed in battle.

It did not surprise Ty when his opponent proceeded to attack Super Conductor Tyranno with three successive versions of Warrior Lady of the Wasteland. On the last attack, though, which meant that the other would finally run out of special summons, Ty laughed. "Whatever you're up to, soldier, you just miscalculated! Now that your life points will go lower than mine, your Megamorph card will double my dinosaur's attack points to 6600. And since you don't have any cards left, whatever monster you summon I can destroy on my turn and I'll win!"

It was true that Ty was finally in the lead in life points, 4900-4500. He thought he was perfectly in control. The others, trying to follow what was happening as best they could, were less certain. Jaden wondered why the stranger would give Huckleberry a power boost. Syrus wondered if it was a mistake, and Chazz said that was impossible. Bastion, with his knowledge of Earth monsters, was just realizing what was about to happen when Atticus said that he knew what the stranger's last monster would be...

"As this is my last special summon, I'd better make it a good one - Amazoness SwordsWoman! That should do the trick!"

"How?" asked Ty. "That monster still only has 1500 attack points."

"Haven't you studied Amazonesses in class?"

"Have I? Maybe last year once or twice - Sam Hill! Now I remember! When Amazoness SwordsWoman takes battle damage, it's not the player who controls her who loses life points - it's the opponent! So THAT'S why you had all those monsters attack me - you were getting your life points lower on purpose to make my Super Conductor Tyranno's attack 6600, and now..."

"And now Amazoness SwordsWoman attacks Super Conductor Tyranno, and the 5100 points of battle damage goes to you instead of me."

Ty watched helplessly as his Life Points ran down to 0. Putting a brave face on it, he said to the stranger, "Well, sarge, I guess you won. That was an excellent tactic there. I never thought about Amazoness SwordsWoman and how you might lower your own Life Points that way. But now I guess I have to do something for you. What do you need done - some secret combat mission or something?"

The voice of the other seemed amused. "Nothing so drastic, my friend. Would you be so good as to accompany me into this chamber?" The stranger went to the door of the inner sanctum and waited for Ty. When Ty joined his conqueror, the two fiugres passed through.

Ty beheld the contents of the Secret Chamber with some interest. As far as he could see, it appeared that the room, with its assorted tables and variety of restraining devices, reminded him of another

room he'd known in his past. He was prepared to swear that the purpose of the chamber was to be used for the practice of tickle torture. This perked him up considerably. He'd been the best student at his military school at withstanding tickle torture. This might be a way for him to make a name for himself here at Duel Academy. He hopped up onto the table allotted to him and eagerly assisted the procedure of being strapped in.

The five previous ticklees, well hidden, listened with interest. Jaden said quietly, "Gee, Huckleberry doesn't seem at all nervous. I wonder if he has any idea he's gonna get his giggle on."

Syrus sighed. Chazz groaned and rolled his eyes. Bastion said, "I wonder what present he'll get."

The ritual of the present then occurred. It was new to Ty. On the whole, he decided he liked it. When he went to his military school class reunion, he'd have to remember to try it. As the present was being opened, the stranger asked Ty if he knew what was about to happen. Trying to look sage, Ty replied, "Well, I imagine you're gonna tickle my feet. So go ahead, give it your best shot!"

"Not quite, Ty," came the reply, "or, perhaps not yet. But you haven't looked at your present yet."

What Ty saw confused him a little. He wondered if he'd been wrong about the whole purpose of the room. "Knee pads? Sam Hill! What do I look like, some kinda skateboarder?"

"Well, you are wearing pants that unzip to become shorts," said the other, unzipping Ty's pants at the moment. Rather than undo any of the bindings, the stranger simply pushed the unzipped pant legs away from Ty's knees. The knee pads proved to be of the fastening variety, so that they were able to be unfastened and refastened around Ty's knees similarly without releasing his legs.

"Hey," said Ty, "these don't feel like ordinary knee pads. Is there something weird about them?"

"Very astute of you. Why don't we really help you to find out?"

Ty had no clue what THAT meant. "They've got some weird kind of lining on the inside," he commented. "It feels almost like they're lined with some kind of... feathers?"

"Right the first time! But not just ordinary feathers. Remote-control operated feathers, my friend. It's a new invention of mine; I thought you might help me test it out."

"Remote control? And, uh, just what do you wanna test?"

But the stranger was fiddling with a remote control device, turning a dial and finally flipping a switch. For an instant Ty didn't realize anything was happening, but felt what was occurring quickly enough.

The feather-lined kneepads responded to the remote control. Instantly Ty experienced what felt like millions of tiny feathers swirling over every inch of his ultra-sensitive knees. "SAM HILL!" he cried, "THAT TICKLES LIKE ANYTHING!" and then immediately burst into wild laughter, surprising himself. While Ty had certainly experience quite his share of tickle practice over the years, for some reason or other it had always started with foot tickling or rib tickling or armpit tickling or tickling somewhere other than his knees first. Now he thought he was finding out where the expression "weak in the knees" came from. Of course it could have been that the kneepads had been constructed to tickle in a particularly excruciating way, but, as Ty laughed uncontrollably from the relentless sensations, it just managed to flash through his head that, even though his knees had always proven to be ticklish,

it had always been much more bearable when the tickling had started anywhere else. Meanwhile he roared with laughter, and to his own surprise felt himself cross the threshold of what he could withstand. That almost never happened even after an hour of tickling and here he was almost ready to break after a few minutes! Ty didn't beg, but he was soon reduced to a mixture of incoherent attempts to blurt out military maxims and hysterical laughter.

The others found themselves being prepared to join the newest member of their group rather earlier than had been the case during the stranger's earlier cases. Ty had quickly reached the point at which the stranger had decided to stop the knee-tickling and bring out the others. The angle at which they were wheeled in on their own tables gave them the opportunity to lift their heads just enough to view what at their angle of vision appeared to be a pair of mountainous bare feet which, given their size and presumably extremely active lifestyle of their possessor, seemed to be remarkably well kept.

Atticus thought he'd have to see right away if he even could get hold of a pair of flips big enough for this new prospective member of his special study group. Bastion, who found this view of Ty's feet even more interesting than his previous one, felt his fingers making little tickling motions and told himself to get a grip on things. Syrus thought to himself that if he had such big and powerful feet he'd probably get a lot more respect around the Academy. Chazz thought that those boots must really work, and briefly regretted that they wouldn't go with anything in his wardrobe, limited as it was. Jaden cried cheerfully, "Great feet, Huckleberry!"

"It's HASSELBERRY!" hissed the other four.

"Isn't that what I said?" asked Jaden.

The stranger then addressed the whole group. "Your new friend here has been so kind as to test a new invention - remote control-operated feathered kneepads. I think you'll all agree with me that they have proved to be quite a smash hit, as you heard for yourselves. But that's not all my assistants and I have been working on. We've been designing similar pads for other parts of the body, and there may be more surprises in the weeks to come. This is always assuming, of course, that none of you succeed in guessing my identity. Of course, you all know what comes now..."

"They may all know, but I don't," said Ty. "What does happen now?"

"We all get our giggle on together, Huckleberry!" cried Jaden. "This oughta be good!"

"We all get tickled at once, as a group," explained Bastion, though he couldn't see whether or not Ty were looking confused by Jaden's statement. "Then our conqueror here sees if any of us can guess his identity. If we all fail, we all have to return next week, when presumably some new duelist will have been lured here to the Sacred Dueling Room to provide the next challenger. It's very simple, really."

Chazz and Syrus, who had experienced more tickling in the secret chamber than any of the others, confirmed that Bastion had provided an accurate summary. The stranger then explained that it had seemed possible for the new feathery kneepads to work nearly as well on feet. Several of the army of robed and hooded minions brought out a large supply of differently-sized attaching pads. These they took some few minutes, owing to a slightly less than ideal fit in general and to there being less of an obvious way for the things to stay on in particular, to attach to the soles of the six students' feet.

As the little group of laughers would presently be growing to number six, some of the boys felt a sense of competition, as if there were some dignity to be won in holding out longer than the others when the fott-tickling began. Ty knew he'd been weakened too much to be able to hold out. Bastion and Syrus just didn't want to be the first one in hysterics. Atticus thought he might have to set a good example. Chazz grimly concentrated on his intention to be the last to laugh. Jaden started laughing before the tickle pads were even activated. "It looks like we're wearing those silly socks that have a big stripe in the middle," he explained, "only of course we're not wearing any socks!" Then the pads were activated by remote control.

A collective shock ran through each of the six ticklish students at the same time. It wasn't quite like the usual kind of tickling. Worn out from the tickling of his knees, Ty knew he had no chance to contain his building laughter. A few grunts marked the pitchings of losing battles to suppress inevitable laughter, but Ty hadn't the energy left even to make a decent stab at suppression. His first laughs flowed through him up from his tickled feet and out his mouth just before those of Jaden, who hadn't tried to hold his laughs at all.

With the two loudest laughers of the six already in action, Syrus weakened at once, knowing he was too suggestible to keep quiet with other people laughing. Bastion, unlike the others, had felt his feet being tickled more potently for the tickling being done by device instead of manually. He was so surprised to hear Hasselberry laughing like a seven-year-old that his own laughter slipped out of him unaware. Four down and two to go. Atticus tried to centre himself by breathing as regularly as he could and keeping his mind near his centre. As the laughter of the others and the tickling sensations from his soles built as the feathers whirred faster, Atticus felt as if he were on the water being drawn by the tide. His laughter rose and receded within him until a strong enough pull of the tide pushed him over a waterfall and his hilarity flooded out to join the general hysteria. Chazz, alas, didn't notice that he succeeded in holding out to last, though he made the most noise of all. He tried with some little success to keep from laughing by screaming, but his screams due to the relentless foot-tickling were finally overpowered, tailing off in a last, "NO! NO!!! NO!NO!NO!!!NO!!!NNNNNOHOHOHUHHUHHAAHAHOHO!!!!!"

When the stranger felt the boys had been tickled long enough, the remote control brought the tickling to an end. One by one the boys all stopped laughing. When they had collected themselves, they were invited to guess the identity of their Mystery Tickler. Ty took a stab, "All I can guess is that, if you're a good enough soldier to outmanoeuvre me, maybe you're that Vice Chancellor Buonaparte?" Ty's guess was declared incorrect. For one reason or another, none of the others felt up to venturing any other guess. The group were reminded of their responsibility to return the following week and dismissed.

On the way back to the dorms, Ty whispered to everyone but Jaden. When they reached Jaden's room, the other five followed him in, then shoved him onto the unmade bed. With Bastion, Chazz, Atticus and Syrus each holding down an arm or a leg, Ty positioned himself at Jaden's feet, declaring, "Now I'm just gonna have to tickle you until you get my name right!" as he dug into Jaden's toes with some wicked finger action.

Jaden laughed for a good fifteen minutes before calling Ty Huckleberry again. Ty sighed and declared that he gave up, stopping the tickling. Jaden said, "I'm sorry, Hasselberry!" The other five were shocked. Then they demanded an explanation, which Jaden was happy to provide. "Well, I thought you might want to punish me if I kept getting your name wrong, and it seemed like a fun way to get my giggle on!" For the next few hours, Jaden did quite definitely get his giggle on, thanks to five tireless pairs of hands...

(Relieved owner of a Crush Card Virus)