

## Get Your Giggle On

Author's Note :

*And now for Zane - the big Kahuna. When the story was planned for five parts, Zane was going to rescue the other boys from their situation. Once I got started on this part, the writing just sailed rapidly along for quite a while, and all the pieces began fitting in together, including my finally settling on the identity of the mysterious stranger.*

Part. 7

### ZINGING ZANE

In his entire time at Duel Academy, Syrus never entirely realized how watchful an eye his brother Zane was keeping on him. His harder than usual class schedule, being picked supposedly at random for testing groups for new cards, being required to type up all the deck lists of the top students at the Academy - all these had been arranged behind the scenes by his older brother. Even Zane's keeping his distance from his brother was part of a campaign to make Syrus fit to be able to stand on his own two feet.

Zane was rarely of the same mind concerning Syrus's progress and capacities for two days running. Some days his brother seemed to show signs that he could become quite a respectable middling professional duelist on the circuit, maybe never good enough to win a major tournament, but capable at least of holding his own enough for the odd success here and there. There were other days when Syrus seemed quite hopeless, and Zane had reports of his completely embarrassing himself over some simple question in Intermediate Traps or some other class.

Research for his double doctorate in dueling kept Zane sufficiently busy and away from the general run of the Academy that he had little firsthand knowledge of Syrus' progress. Happily, he regularly met with Alexis; they liked consulting each other about little projects. Atticus, though his best friend, was less reliable. It was through Alexis that Zane heard, without especial interest, that Atticus apparently had been gaining influence over some of the students.

One day Alexis reported to Zane that she'd seen Jaden rushing off somewhere in a hurry... and wearing flip-flops. Zane didn't find that terribly unusual. Jaden was usually in a hurry, being prone to tardiness. Although Zane hadn't had any particular knowledge of Jaden wearing flip-flops before then, they certainly suited his style. Zane heard the report without finding the incident especially curious.

The next day, Alexis had another sighting to report. This time she'd seen Chazz wandering off somewhere at his usual sauntering pace, as if he knew that, wherever he might be going, they would be bound to wait for him until he deigned to appear. Apparently Chazz was also wearing flip-flops. Zane heard this news with little more interest than he'd felt in the case of Jaden. Chazz always made a point of being fashionable, and flip-flops must have come into the fashion in some circle of people Chazz respected or thought worth impressing. Zane knew little of fashion and cared less. He shrugged off the news.

The day after that, Zane showed a little more interest. Alexis reported that the new student, Hasselberry, who had a Dinosaur deck, had apparently joined the ranks of the flip-floppers. Zane did find this a little curious. He had been present during the discussion of Hasselberry's application to

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wear his big army boots. Why he'd suddenly turn up in flip-flops seemed worthy of some speculation. Alexis thought that perhaps Atticus had gotten some of the students interested in one of his wild ideas. To Zane, it seemed possible.

On the following day, Alexis happened to spot Bastion. At last Zane had to admit that there must be something highly unusual going on. He had not known Bastion well himself, but had heard of conversations in which Chazz or Alexis had been told how they could improve their dueling by 3.1% if they would simply do some yoga pose for two minutes every morning or something of the sort. And the whole Academy had long been aware of Bastion and his superiour trainers, due to an unfortunate incident in Ra

Yellow in which a fellow student had exchanged Bastion's trainers for an identical pair as a joke and Bastion had caught on to the exchange and known something was wrong at once (in the manner of the True Princess who couldn't sleep due to a pea being under her pile of mattresses). After hearing that Bastion had joined Atticus' flip-floppers, Zane resolved to do something - but what?

The following day, Zane was still only half of a mind to find Atticus and question him. But Alexis had a piece of news which finally startled Zane into action. He was not surprised to learn of yet another member joining Atticus' little group. But Zane was shocked to hear that the latest of Alexis' sightings was of Syrus. It was all he could do to hide from Alexis how deeply this distressed and shocked him. Syrus? In flip-flops?

Impossible! But Zane had not been able to keep his countenance perfectly during years of victorious duels for nothing. Not a scintilla of emotion did he betray. Alexis could have been telling him that Jasmine and Mindy couldn't decide whether to change their make-up to a tenth of a shade lighter or a tenth of a shade deeper for all the emotion Zane showed. Inside, however, he seethed with dismay and determination. When he and Alexis parted company, he told her that he had an important errand to run on the following day, and that he might be late or miss her altogether. Would she mind a cancellation? Alexis had no objection.

Getting through the rest of the day was an ordeal. Nothing would satisfy Zane but to see for himself exactly what Syrus and all the others were doing. But Zane feared the worst. His greatest secret dread was only too apparently coming true before his eyes, or about to do so.

All that night, Zane's dreams were of his childhood. He'd been so thrilled, when Syrus came along, to have a little brother. When finally introduced to Duel Monsters, he'd been even more thrilled, as it made him feel just like the great Seto Kaiba himself. It was one of the happiest days of his life when his little brother was finally old enough to become his playmate.

Zane in his dream state recalled exactly how fretful little Syrus had been, even as a very small boy indeed. Then one day, the young Zane had discovered his little brother trying to take off his socks in preparation for a nap he'd been ordered. Syrus had gotten one sock off, but said he was too tired to remove the other. Zane had offered to get the sock off, and had done so. But in the act Zane's fingers had run up Syrus' bared sole.

It was the first time little Syrus had ever been tickled. His response was a delighted and delightful giggle. It was also the first time Zane had ever tickled anyone. Without even knowing what he was doing he ran his fingers up and down Syrus' sole again. Syrus responded with even happier giggles. Then the fingers of Zane's other hand found themselves almost magnetically drawn to the sole of his brother's other foot as well. The two brothers enjoyed a minute or so of happy tickle play. Then Zane had left Syrus to take his nap and gone.

The encounter had been the start of a new phase in the brothers' relationship. Zane was absolutely thrilled to have made Syrus so happy and to have heard his little brother's laughter. He'd soon begun to find occasion after occasion to tickle Syrus' little feet until the little guy would squeal and giggle enough to lose any sort of gloom or upset that might have befallen him. Syrus, having always been an anxious boy, had almost always had some cause for worry, and, loving equally the attention and the tickling bestowed upon him by his big brother, had grown just as attached to their private game as Zane. It had soon become a ritual of at least daily performance. Even if no other opportunity had arisen during the day, Syrus never went to sleep at night until Zane had come over to his bed, thrust his hand under the bedclothes at the end and tickled his feet, which also made Zane sleep better as well.

The two brothers had gone on that way for quite a happy little time until they'd been discovered. Zane had recently taken to teasing Syrus on occasion about the Tickle Monster, the only monster about whom Syrus had ever been able to hear anything at all without reacting with absolute dread and panic. One night, as Zane's hands crept up to the surface of the mattress, he'd been teasing his little brother about how, "The Tickle Monster is on the prowl, and now he knows he's found what he's looking for... two delicious little ticklish bare FEET!!!" as he'd pouncingly begun his tickle attack and Syrus had squealed louder than usual, loud enough that their father had heard the noise and quietly gone to their bedroom just in time to witness the most vigorous portion of what Zane was calling his Monstrous Torture Attack.

Mr Truesdale had looked at his sons, shocked. Syrus' expression became anxious and a bit frightened. Zane, always ready to shoulder responsibility for any mishap for either himself or his brother, began to apologize, intending the apology as one for the noise they'd been making.

What Zane never learned was that, to Mr Truesdale, the scene bore a completely different interpretation than that of its being simply a bit of play between two affectionate brothers. Almost unconsciously, his mind had flashed back to when he'd been Syrus' age many years ago. He had been quite like Syrus in appearance and temperament, even down to the very small and very ticklish feet. Only in his youth, the tickling he'd undergone at his own brother's hands had not been an affectionate game loved by both players but what's he'd felt and interpreted to be a ritual of torture that had early in his life destroyed all his natural enjoyment of being tickled and instilled a dread of the practice instead. When he'd walked in on his sons, only the alarm of discovery in Syrus' face, which mirrored his own expressions of fear and agony as he'd tried to face the terrifying tortures of his brother night after night, had registered any impression. That Syrus had been experiencing delight until the moment of knowing they were being observed and thinking that trouble was inevitable was too foreign a concept for Mr Truesdale to take in.

As might have been expected given his powerful reaction to the scene, Mr Truesdale's response had been swift and strong. He'd taken Zane into the study with him and impressed on his young son the seriousness of what he was going to tell him. He could not mention the events of his own past; the misery and shame they caused him were still too great. But he could not emphasize enough to the boy that Zane MUST NEVER TICKLE SYRUS EVER EVER EVER AGAIN. Even uttering "the T word" had taken a toll on him; it was a word he had not spoken since the last time he'd seen his brother, a word that recalled to his mind all the times his brother had tickled him until he'd wet the bed and then taunted him as a bed-wetter.

Zane had always been particularly obedient to his parents. It would not have occurred to him, even in the face of possible accusation of wrongdoing, to defend himself by pointing out how much Syrus

loved being tickled. He'd simply apologized and promised he would never do it again. There must be something terrible about tickling if it could make his father so upset. He'd kept his word.

But so strongly had his father's reaction impressed itself upon him that Zane had never explained to Syrus that Father didn't want them to play their tickling games any more. Syrus, in turn, after a couple of days of not being tickled, went about looking sad and anxious, wondering why his brother had abandoned their favourite game and thinking it was his fault. Their father, seeing Syrus looking unhappy, had concluded that Zane must still be tickling Syrus, and, without question or explanation, proceeded to pull every string he could and ship Zane off to a Dueling Boarding School immediately.

Zane's years at his Dueling Boarding School had been rather less eventful for him than tended to be the case for most students. As a new boy, he'd been considered briefly by several of the older boys for the traditional position of Tickle Slave, it being the habit at the school for the senior boys to appropriate new students to fill such a role. But in the end Zane's modesty had always preserved him. He'd never shown any sign of that fascination with the senior boys' feet that always found a new boy some willing protector. His own feet he'd neither flaunted nor hidden. In the end, the seniors had all decided that there were more interesting prospects.

In the due course of time, Zane had become a senior boy at the school himself. By that time, he'd become familiar with the rampant practice of tickling among his fellow students, but had always met any inquiry from a contemporary about why he never joined in with a cold stare which discouraged further inquiry. The new boys, though, by his last two or three terms at the school, would usually think of him as the best choice of all possible Tickle Masters. Many of the more adventurous of them had contrived to flaunt their bare feet in his presence in the best invitations to tickle them that they could contrive. But Zane had trained himself too well to accept any such invitation or indeed even to seem to notice any. Once or twice a boy with rather small feet might have reminded him of Syrus; that was all. Before long, all the boys who'd angled to be Zane's Tickle Slave had found more accommodating Tickle Masters elsewhere.

Zane had remembered this when Syrus' turn to go away to school had come. He'd given Syrus a serious talk. Without using the T word, he conveyed to his little brother that it would be a very bad thing for his studies if he were to let his fellow students see much of his feet. Zane's manner had perhaps made the point even more strongly than he'd intended. Whenever he'd seen Syrus since then, he'd never had an indication that Syrus had failed to heed his strongly worded advice. Indeed, he had hardly even seen his little brother's bare feet himself during that period.

And now here was Alexis' curious sighting. Zane trusted Alexis too much to doubt that she'd actually seen any of the things or people she'd reported. Atticus was one thing. Zane had trained himself so well that he'd been able to befriend him despite Atticus' choice in footwear. Jaden and Chazz, very likely. Hasselberry and Bastion, less likely but still at least seemingly possible. But Syrus? No. Never. Impossible. If there were one student at Duel Academy whom Zane would have sworn would never appear in public wearing flip-flops, it had to be Syrus. Something must be terribly, dreadfully wrong. And Zane knew that it was up to him to find out exactly what that something was.

At what appeared to be approximately the correct hour, Zane set out on his quest to find Syrus and see for himself exactly what was going on. Not that Zane had any of Ty Hasselberry's practice or expertise at tracking. Rather, he relied on the general sense of location common to many older brothers of a watchful turn of mind. If Syrus were in any sort of trouble, he had to find him. Zane simply began walking in the general direction Alexis had reported as being roughly the way she'd all the flip-floppers headed. Zane missed one or two signs that Ty might have noticed which would have told him he was on the right track. But that made no difference. With the true acumen of a

Concerned Big Brother, Zane soon found his attention caught by a sand dune that seemed almost to be beckoning him. Approaching the dune, he rather thought he heard strange noises. Then he knew he heard something. Then he thought he heard Syrus. Then he was certain he heard Syrus. Then he passed around the dune and saw Syrus.

To be accurate, what Zane actually saw first was a large pile of flip-flops. Then he saw a number of duel disks, two of which had apparently just been put to use. Then he saw Syrus. His little brother was stretched out in the sand that gave the cove a nice little beach. Atticus and Bastion each held one arm firmly down, while Chazz and Hasselberry each grasped a leg. Syrus was being held totally immobile. More than that, he was quite barefooted. And even more than that, there was Jaden, with a few seagull feathers in hand, seating himself right in front of Syrus' still-little bare feet.

"I don't know, Syrus," Jaden was saying in a teasing voice. "How are we ever gonna make you into a top duelist if you don't even remember that Elemental Hero Wildheart isn't affected by Traps? You might have won the duel if you'd remembered that. But since you lost, I hope you're ready to get your giggle on!" And Jaden ran a couple of feathers up and down Syrus' soles. Syrus burst out laughing.

Hearing Syrus' laughter froze Zane in his tracks. He recognized that laughter. He had not heard it for some years, but it sang out to him as clearly as it had when they'd begun their tickling games. Zane felt a powerful impulse to step forth and stop Jaden from tickling Syrus' feet. If he felt another impulse to administer a foot-tickling of his own to his little brother, he didn't even notice it. But Zane had always made a point of not interfering directly in his little brother's affairs. Meddling now might make things worse. He needed to think before he acted. As Syrus' laughter grew louder, Zane sensed an urgent need to get away from the scene to do his thinking. He withdrew, entirely unnoticed.

Zane returned to his suite of rooms. Then he spent the rest of the day puzzling over what he'd seen. How could Syrus have gotten himself involved in something so over his head? Had there been any sign lately of something like this happening? Scouring through the school's dueling records, Zane observed that Syrus' results had improved lately, and by more than his usual bumps. Maybe there was something in that. The other students in Atticus' little club were among the top duelists of the school. Maybe they had arranged some sort of deal with Syrus by which they were helping him win duels in return for his letting them tickle him. Would Syrus really stoop to such desperate measures? From what Alexis or even Atticus occasionally mentioned of Syrus' intense determination to live up to the Truesdale name, Zane considered that it was possible. And Atticus, whom he'd never told about his father's prohibition on tickling, might have thought of something like that simply intending to help Syrus out. Zane determined that he would put a stop to it and rescue his brother, preferably without involving himself with Atticus' flip-flop group. But how?

After Zane passed a restless night, he received and opened the letter the next morning. At first sight, it seemed to be destined to assist him out of his troubles. Present himself at the Sacred Dueling Room at 4:15 and perhaps find the assistance he needed? Well, he was certainly setting out to do something difficult and could probably use all the assistance he could get. Could the whole thing be some sort of joke? He wouldn't put it past Atticus. But Zane was not one to fear the antics of his friends. And he was fairly sure that he had not been observed for the brief moment he'd witnessed Syrus' ordeal at the cove the previous day, making it all the more likely that whatever motivation lay behind the writing of this letter would be on the level.

As Zane was always punctual without thinking anything about it, 4:15 arrived to find him on the point of entering the Sacred Dueling Room. Knowing tradition, he removed his footwear and entered the Sacred Dueling Room barefooted without either apprehension or enjoyment of the state. When the

robed and hooded stranger appeared at the other end of the room, Zane made a quick appraisal. He concluded that the other was not Atticus or any of his group in disguise, and remained impassive in demeanour.

The stranger spoke first in that unrecognizable digitized voice. “So, Zane Truesdale at last. I am honoured to receive you here.”

Zane gave a very slight nod of his head in response. Then he replied, “Do you have anything to do with what’s been going on with my little brother?”

“Syrus has visited this room under the same circumstances as your being here now,” replied the other.

“And does this have any connection with what I saw happening to him yesterday?”

“In the case of anyone less august than yourself, Mr Truesdale, I might merely decline to answer. For your sake, I’ll say that I believe I can answer all your questions to your complete satisfaction, but I shall only do so after you defeat me in a duel. Then I’ll give you all the help you want. And if you don’t defeat me, then you help me. Is it a bargain?”

Zane replied, “I’m afraid I’m in a bit of a hurry. Can we skip the duel; is there any other form of compensation I could offer?”

“Sorry,” came the response, “you know what rules and regulations are like. We have to duel, or else it’s no answers. I can’t make exceptions, even for you.”

“Very well then,” said Zane, “if we must, we must. I doubt it matters, anyway; I just wanted to save a little time. As you may well know, I’m anxious to help my brother.”

“How good of you to accept my terms. We might debate why or even if your brother Syrus really requires assistance, but we can save that little pleasantry for after our duel. As you do seem to be in a hurry, we can start right away. Would you prefer to go first or second?”

“I shall go second,” said Zane. With any luck, he’d draw a hand that could win the duel in a single turn. The opponents took up their positions and drew their opening hands.

The stranger took his first turn, announcing after drawing, “I believe I shall begin with one monster in defence position and... let me see, four cards in the back row. Your turn.”

Zane had liked his opening hand. It appeared that he was guaranteed to do at least 2100 damage to his opponent’s life points, and, if he drew the correct card... He drew. He looked.

“Well, this is just what I wanted to see,” Zane announced. “Unless your monster is Morphing Jar and you have Acid Trap Hole face-down, I think this turn may be all I need. I’ll start with Heavy Storm to destroy your four face-down cards. Are you going to activate any of them?”

The stranger gave a shake of the head. “I’m afraid I can’t.” The cards were revealed to be Black Horn of Heaven, Mirror Force, Torrential Tribute and Ring of Destruction. Zane looked at his opponent.

“Why would you put four powerful trap cards at risk on your first turn? Even Syrus knows better than to duel like that.”

“Well, I know how many ways you have of getting really powerful monsters onto the field, and I didn’t know you would be able to play Heavy Storm so early,” was the reply.

“If it’s any consolation,” Zane went on, “I don’t think it would have helped you keeping them in your hand. Now I’ll play the card I just drew - one of my favourites, and a card you were afraid of my playing - Power Bond. This lets me send the two Cyber Dragons I hold in my hand to the graveyard to make a fusion summon of Cyber Twin Dragon from my fusion deck. Its attack increases from 2800 to 5600. Of course, I take 2800 damage during the End Phase of this turn, but I don’t think we’re going to get that far. I still have my regular summon for the turn, and I use it to summon Mystic Swordsman LV2, just in case your monster has a Flip Effect or does something nasty when it’s destroyed in battle. All I have to do is order Mystic Swordsman LV2 to attack your face-down defence position monster, and your monster is destroyed automatically without being flipped face-up or damage calculation. Then with your field clear, the two attacks my Cyber Twin Dragon is allowed reduce your life points to zero. Now, Mystic Swordsman LV2, attack! You can concede if you like,” he told the stranger politely.

“But that would be premature,” said the stranger. “You see, your Cyber Twin Dragon doesn’t get a chance to attack. You made the right play attacking with your Mystic Swordsman LV2 - most of the time. There are many monster effects that could have stopped you from winning if you didn’t destroy the monster with an effect instead of battle. But that was just what I wanted you to do.”

Zane almost lost his poise. “You really wanted your monster destroyed by an effect and not in battle? When I saw you set four cards, I thought the monster might be Mecha-Dog Marron, but that won’t do enough damage to hurt me or stop my attacks... oh, so it’s...”

“Exactly!” cried the other, “Neko Mane King! You sent it to the graveyard by a card effect, which means that your turn automatically advances to the End Phase. You pay the 2800 life points for Power Bond, and that’s it. Now it’s my turn. First, I draw. Next, I activate Card of Safe Return, so that whenever a monster is summoned to the field from the graveyard I can draw a card from my deck. As draw power seems to be the order of the day, now I activate Graceful Charity, to draw three cards and discard two.” After drawing the three cards, the stranger laughed.

“Now to discard two cards. I choose Manticore of Darkness and Winged Kuriboh, keeping one card in my hand. As it’s a monster and I can’t summon it, the only thing I can do is end my Main Phase and go directly to my turn’s End Phase...”

“What, you’re just leaving yourself with an open field and a continuous spell that won’t stop me from attacking?” asked Zane. “Or are you going to use your Manticore’s effect and summon it from the graveyard?”

“Right the first time! You weren’t the top student at this Academy for nothing! Quite right. In the end phase of a turn in which Manticore of Darkness was sent to the graveyard, I can send a Beast, Beast-Warrior or Winged-Beast from my hand or field to the graveyard and special summon the Manticore from the graveyard to the field. Then, of course, thanks to Card of Safe Return, I can draw a card from my deck.”

“So that might keep you alive one more turn if I don’t get a good draw,” Zane began...

“More than that. The card I’m sending to the graveyard from my hand is a second Manticore of Darkness. Therefore, after the first Manticore is summoned from the graveyard to the field I can

send it from the field to the graveyard to summon the second one from the graveyard to the field. Then I draw another card, and then..."

"Then you can repeat the procedure and draw as many cards as you like," said Zane.

"Exactly. And here's a look at my fourth draw." The stranger showed Zane a card.

Zane looked stunned. "You're running Exodia?" The card was Left Arm of the Forbidden One.

"Of course! How else could I ever defeat you? Now, here's the Right Leg... a few more draws... Left Leg... gracious, there's less than half my deck left; I do hope I remembered to put in all the parts... Right Arm... only about seven cards left... ah, here it is, the last piece, Exodia the Forbidden One! All five pieces are in my hand - an instant win!"

"I see," said Zane. "But now - does this mean you won't help me find out about what's going on with Syrus?"

"On the contrary! You'll help me with something, and by the end of it all I think you'll know everything you want to know about Syrus and what he's been doing these past few weeks!"

"I don't understand."

"That's all right. You will soon enough. Now, would you be so kind as to join me over here?" The stranger went to and opened the door to the Secret Chamber. Zane, still puzzled, walked slowly to join the other. They entered the next room together.

The stranger led Zane to a table that was just the right size for him. Zane noticed that the table was equipped with restraining devices. Then, when he was asked to hop onto the table, he looked at the other with some curiosity.

"But, what does this have to do with..." he started to ask. Then Zane flinched. "Oh... Syrus... you say he's been here... did you... did he...?"

"You mean, are you going to go through the same thing Syrus did? More or less."

"And what does this have to do with what Syrus has been getting up to?"

"That is a good question. But would you please get on the table now? Just position yourself through those straps. I'll help you," the other spoke in a casual manner.

As Zane warily complied with the request, tucked away well out of sight, the six previous victims were stunned. "They got Zane? I can't believe they got Zane!" whispered Syrus.

"I wonder how," came from Bastion.

"Well, we knew that hooded freak had to be a top duelist," from Chazz.

"I don't know if I can think of any more different ways for us to lose," from Jaden.

"Probably a One-Turn Kill. Zane likes to win with One-Turn Kills himself," Atticus summed up.

“Zane... now he’s your brother, right?” whispered Ty, who was impressed by the reaction of the others, to Syrus.

“Yes. He’s the top student in the history of Duel Academy,” whispered Syrus proudly.

“And he’s YOUR brother?”

“Yes,” whispered Syrus. “I got the good looks in the family.”

“Sure you did, Sy,” Jaden placated his first Academy roommate, while Ty mentally formed the impression that Zane would have to resemble Quasimodo or something like that.

In the meantime, Zane had been strapped securely into place on the table. “I still don’t entirely understand what this is about,” he said. “It has something to do with Syrus, I know. I suppose I can take your word for it that it has something to do with Atticus and his little club as well.”

“You’re very... fastidious, aren’t you, Zane?” asked the other, not expecting a reply, then continuing, “You never quite come right out and say anything directly. Now, I suppose we ought to begin. At this point these last few weeks, I’ve given some of my other guests a little present. But I suspect you’d prefer to dispense with that little civility, and get down to business. So, what do you think I’m going to do?”

“The same thing you did to Syrus, I suppose.”

“Which is?”

“What Atticus and his group were doing yesterday.” In their secluded area, the other six looked at each other wonderingly. How had Zane ever gotten to know about that?

“Now that’s just what I mean. I want to hear you say it precisely; what is going to happen?”

“Oh. I suppose...” Zane drew a deep breath, then continued, “you’re going to... tickle my feet.”

“There! Now, that wasn’t so hard to say, was it? And you’re quite right. I am going to tickle your feet. I won’t be using any of the little tools I employed on some of your friends, just my own two hands. I hope you don’t object if I keep my gloves on? No? Good. Now, where to start?” The stranger made little finger-digging motions at Zane’s heels. Zane did not react at all.

The stranger’s gloved fingers moved up to Zane’s arches. Zane continued to give no reaction whatsoever. On the other side, there began to be some mutterings. “Isn’t Zane ticklish?” Ty asked Syrus.

“How would Syrus know? Zane never had an OLDER brother,” hissed Chazz.

“You had older brothers, of course, Chazz, didn’t you?” asked Bastion.

Syrus sighed. “Zane doesn’t like tickling an...” he began, stopping himself just in time.

Atticus muttered thoughtfully, “I never tried to find out; I don’t know why...”

Jaden made an unsurprising contribution. “Come on, Zane; get your giggle on!” But he said it softly, so that only the other previous victims heard him.

The stranger’s fingers had continued on almost all the way up Zane’s soles. They were reaching the base of his toes, and still getting no reaction out of Zane. Even spreading Zane’s toes and scrunching about in between accomplished nothing. The stranger paused. “Well, well. It appears either that you aren’t ticklish or that you have remarkable self-control.”

“What does any of this have to do with Syrus?” Zane shot back. “Have you been tickling his feet as well?”

“Of course. Syrus was the first visitor I entertained here. He’s proven quite appropriately ticklish.”

“And did you direct Atticus’ group to tickle him as well?”

The other looked almost genuinely surprised. “I have no control over what happens outside of this room. I have invited some of the best and brightest of Duel Academy to meet me here. I have dueled them and tickled them. Whatever they may have done elsewhere is no concern of mine, or at least isn't under my direction.”

“At least tell me, though, who exactly has visited you here.”

“Really, Mr Truesdale, you are being rather demanding. If it were anyone of less stature than yourself asking me such a question, I might decline to answer. But as I start working my way back down your feet again, I can tell you that my visitors have been Syrus, Chazz, Jaden, Bastion, Atticus and Tyranno. Now, are you sure that you don’t feel even the least little bit like laughing?”

“Right now I’m only concerned with what’s going on with my brother. At least now I know that everyone I saw yesterday has been here and been tickled by you. So, whether or not you meant to do so, you have been influencing people.”

“Thank you for telling me so. It’s rather gratifying. It would be even more gratifying if you’d laugh for me. After all, it appears that I’ve given you useful information, even though I won the duel. So how about it?”

Zane made no reply. Tracing finger patterns along the outer edges of Zane’s soles and, for variety, into a couple of promising-looking spots on the tops of his feet, the stranger began studying Zane’s reactions more carefully than it appeared. By the end of another circuit around Zane’s feet, it was just perceptible but clear that Zane was unobtrusively holding his breath.

After consideration, the gloved fingers probed carefully right around the balls of Zane’s feet looking for a sensitive spot. The six listeners began to marvel. Perhaps Zane really was completely not ticklish. Syrus wondered why he didn’t know. Chazz wondered if Zane not laughing would bring about the end of these weekly sessions. Jaden felt a little sorry for poor Zane. How terrible not being ticklish! What none of the previous six could hear, however, was the slightest involuntary flinch of Zane’s feet when a particularly ticklish spot was probed, or the stranger’s raised eyebrow in the slightest gesture of impending triumph.

Going back to the arches, the stranger said, “You have to laugh, Zane. Let it out. You know you want to.”

Zane actually neither knew nor cared what he wanted in that regard. He had more important matters in mind. “You have to tell me why you’ve been tickling Syrus. It’s important that I kn...ah!”

Six pairs of eyes opened wide as the boys to whom they were attached took in Zane’s gasp. Then they heard the stranger speak persuasively, “It has to be. Don’t resist any longer.” Even though they could not see gloved fingers going back to delving between Zane’s toes, each one mentally started to wait for the dam to burst, certain that it would.

“Only if... haha... you tell me... hoho... about my brother!” Zane struggled to the last.

“You’ll know all about Syrus. But this is the only way.” The fingers worked faster.

“I really... really can’t... hahaha... please don’t... make meheehee!” Zane twisted and turned as much as he could, breathing hard, trying to force out words. “I... I... ah... uh... uh... oh... uh...” he went on for a moment.

The six listeners all made eye contact with each other, silently agreeing to a general Here It Comes. Zane continued to splutter for a bit in the manner of a briskly shaken soda bottle being opened for the first time before he finally had to let go, “WAAAAAhaaaHAAAhuhhuhhohahuhHAAAAA!!!!”

Despite the impact of his father’s forceful warning on his views, Zane had not especially been fighting against his ticklishness. Really, he’d been fighting for Syrus. Although as far as he could recall he’d never been tickled before in the entire course of his life, he had always prepared himself as best he could for duels or other challenges. Having seen Syrus being tickled, it had struck him as plausible that he might be tickled

himself during whatever ordeal would await him in the Sacred Dueling Room. He’d steeled himself for the ordeal as best he could. Possibly, it flashed through his mind as he began laughing, had he been used to being tickled, he might have been able to hold out longer. But, it also just flashed through his head in the midst of his many concerns on his brother’s behalf, he was much more ticklish than he’d thought he’d be and there would have been no way he could have held out indefinitely. Then Zane’s laughter became continuous.

The stranger’s minions prepared to wheel out the other six boys to join Zane. Jaden automatically began to prepare to voice his favourite sentiment. The other five, practically in unison, looked at Jaden as best they could and all hissed, “DON’T SAY IT!!!” Zane kept laughing as the other tables were wheeled out.

The stranger stopped tickling Zane’s feet when all seven tables were neatly arranged in a circle. Zane gradually stopped laughing, opened his eyes, and saw Syrus and the others. Zane looked taken aback.

Syrus mouthed a silent, Hi, bro. Atticus gave Zane a wry smile that seemed to say, Welcome to the club. Bastion and Chazz seemed in shock. Ty wasn’t sure how to look. Jaden, being Jaden, couldn’t resist.

“Wow, Zane!” Jaden said admiringly. “You really got your giggle on!”

A collective groan of monumental proportions rose from the others. Various apologies formed on many lips. Then they began to notice an unexpected noise. It took them a moment to recognize it.

Without anyone even close to tickling him, Zane began to chuckle. He seemed to be trying unsuccessfully to stop himself. In between strengthening repeated bouts of giggles, he gasped, “Oh

my God... I can't stand it... get your... giggle on... funniest thing... I've... ever... heard..." before laughter overpowered him totally.

The other boys looked shocked. Could this really be Zane, with the best poker face and the slowest sense of humour at Duel Academy, going crazy over the most inane phrase? Even Jaden hardly seemed able to believe it. And one of the stranger's eyebrows rose ever so slightly.

The chance had not been foreseen completely, but was too good to be missed. At a slight nod from the stranger, the bare feet of all seven boys were tickled with gusto. Zane, still laughing heartily, and all his friends, concentrating on his situation, were all taken by surprise and burst into furious laughter at once. For some time afterwards, there was nothing to see but the wiggling toes and twitching soles of tickled bare feet, or hear but hysterical laughter rising to fever pitch, though there was no one near to see or hear any of the edifying sights or sounds on offer.

After what felt like many hours of tickling but had in actuality taken up a considerably shorter period of time, Zane and Syrus began to appear winded. Gradually, the tickling wound down. Little by little, the ticklish laughter in the room slowed and eventually ceased. The stranger then explained to Zane as the newest recruit that this was the time for any guess of identity to be made.

Zane was too worn out to venture any intelligent guess, and chose to pass. No one else had any clear idea, even after so many weeks, of who the stranger might chance to be. Syrus finally ventured to hazard a guess.

"If you could defeat my brother in a duel," he said, "you must be one of the absolute best duelists ever. Why, it wouldn't surprise me if you were Maximillion Pegasus himself, who invented the game. You'd have to be someone like that to defeat Zane." The stranger denied being Pegasus, but complimented Syrus for making an intelligent guess. Then came the declaration that all seven boys would be expected to return the following week. Then they were all released from their bonds, free to return to their places.

The general astonishment at the developments of the afternoon was enough to make the walk back to the dormitories a silent one. By common unspoken agreement they all accompanied Zane inside his suite of rooms and assisted Zane to flop onto his bed in preparation for a much-needed nap. Then something unspoken began to pass between them all. They all looked at each other before Syrus finally prompted his brother, "Zane?"

Happily, the seven of them were quite alone in that area for some time to come. A good deal later and well into the evening after much further mayhem had ensued, Zane finally said, "I'm sorry; I know I shouldn't ask, but please... one last time... would you say it?"

"Sure, Zane!" replied Jaden as cheerfully the thirty-sixth time as he had the first, "Anyone with super-ticklish barefeet had better get ready to get your giggle on!" Then the still-eager hands of the other five joined Jaden's in assisting the already chuckling Zane to do exactly that, each of the other six boys laughing as freely as Zane himself at the ticklish plight of the top student in the history of Duel Academy.