

Get your giggle on

Part 8 : Stammering Aster

Aster Phoenix was not entirely sure exactly what he was doing at Duel Academy. As the hottest star on the professional circuit, what was the point of his having been enrolled as a sort of Guest Student Lecturer here? That was what his status amounted to, after all, although he had not actually done anything that would have struck him as an equivalent to studying. He'd given a lecture or two, and had spent the rest of his time defeating scores of aspiring duelists. It might be a pleasant enough way to kill off a few empty weeks in the schedule, but it certainly wasn't what he'd expected.

At least he'd been permitted to retain his own wardrobe and not been required to wear any of the varicoloured outfits sported by residents of the various dormitories. Not that they weren't all right so far as uniforms went, but they weren't in his style. Not many guys his age went in for neckties on a voluntary basis. Before he'd come here, he'd expected his neckwear might draw some comment, though there he'd been mistaken. What had surprised him a little was that he'd drawn a few comments at a party for the elite duelists of the school on his choice of shoes, which could serve as evening wear anywhere.

Not many days after that, he'd been opening his mail, working his way through a fairly thick pile at good speed, when he opened a personal letter. That surprised Aster, as he didn't think anyone who knew where he was would be likely to write him a personal letter. After reading a couple of sentences, he knew the letter was not for him. It was written from an uncle to his nephew, and Aster didn't have any uncles. He quickly replaced the letter in its envelope, turned it around, and saw that it had been addressed to Zane Truesdale, the double doctorate candidate whose box for mail was directly next to Aster's.

Aster had met Zane frequently at dueling events in the outside world. He set out to find Zane in order to return the letter with an appropriate apology for not having had time to notice the address before opening it. It did not take Aster long to find Zane, who was, as often, conversing with Alexis, whom Aster vaguely remembered as having been present at one or two gatherings. They seemed not to be enjoying their conversation much. When Aster approached them and excused himself for interrupting, they both seemed pleased if anything. Alexis excused herself and hurried away.

Aster made his apology and handed Zane the letter. Zane seemed unconcerned and cordial. Even the explanation that Aster had seen it was from his uncle did not seem to cause him undue concern. As it seemed Zane might be about to ask him a question, Aster did not hurry away. Zane glanced through the letter, then took a second look. Then he asked sharply, "How much of this did you read?"

"Just into the second sentence, really. As soon as I could tell it was from someone's uncle, I knew it wasn't mine and folded it up again. If there was anything important in it, I didn't see it, really I didn't."

Zane seemed to come to himself. "I'm sorry. The last few days have been... a little unsettling. This changes quite a lot of things, but you wouldn't have anything to do with it anyway. I'm sorry I snapped."

"Forget it. I'm sorry I didn't notice the front of the envelope. I had a big pile of mail to open."

Zane expressed again that everything was fine, picked up a couple of bags that had been on the ground next to him, and began to walk away. Aster noticed one small bag left behind, picked it up, called out to Zane, and handed him the bag. Zane took it, thanked Aster again, and walked off. Alexis reappeared a moment later.

“You’re Aster Phoenix, of course,” she began. “Could I ask you something?”

“Why not?” Aster replied. “And you’re... Alexis Rhodes.”

“Right. I know you’ve met my brother Atticus.”

“It would be hard to forget Atticus,” Aster said. And he meant it. Who would be likely to forget Atticus? At the gathering of elite duelists freshest in Aster’s memory, Atticus had been the first of several people who had commented about his shoes. Atticus himself, despite the formality of the occasion, had appeared in flip-flops. Aster thought it interesting that someone who’d made such a unique choice himself in that department would be striking up such a conversation.

He’d replied, “Same to you, dude.” (It was one of Aster’s greatest accomplishments that he was one of the few people on the face of the planet who could say, “dude,” in conversation without sounding dim or undercultured; it was “dude” as James Bond might have said it.)

Atticus had smiled and said, “They’re great; you bring any of your own?”

“I didn’t bring a lot of different clothes with me,” Aster had said, shaking his head. After that, Atticus had asked if he might want a pair, Aster had admitted that it might be possible, and they’d parted. But Aster had seen several others apparently paying close attention to their conversation - the clever but somewhat socially inept Bastion, Chazz with the expensively and Jaden with the naturally messy hair. Even Zane had glanced over at them once or twice. And then both Chazz and Bastion had later had something to say to him about shoes.

Jaden had not taken the opportunity to speak to Aster until just before the end of the party, saying, “I have a question for you. Do you ever... like, you know... get your giggle on?”

The slightest of shadows had crossed Aster’s face before he replied, “Get my giggle on... now I suppose this might involve something extreme like... oh, tickle torture? Well... let’s just say... it has been known.”

“Sweet! Be seeing ya!” Jaden had called as he’d hurried away.

And now here was Alexis apologizing for Atticus. “My brother’s being a bit of a bad influence around here. For some reason, he’s been getting a lot of my friends into some weird thing. I don’t know what it is. But I’ve seen four or five of them going around in flip-flops. It’s probably part of some secret society, because it’s usually at about the same time of day and they always seem to be going in the same direction. And none of them seem quite like themselves any more. I’m starting to worry about it, because the Academy’s unsettled enough without the top duelists acting out of character. Zane’s gotten concerned about it, too. I’m surprised Atticus hasn’t tried to get him into that little group, not that it would work...”

Aster almost opened his mouth. He stopped himself just in time. Some instinct just warned him off of letting the words cross his lips. He didn’t tell Alexis that he’d seen something in the bag he’d

returned to Zane, and what he'd seen, though partially due to being hidden by wrapping, was clearly a pair of flip-flops.

As Aster was to learn later, the days that had passed since Zane's visit to the Sacred Dueling Room had been strenuous for him. Zane had struggled against his own ticklishness as mightily as he could, but his incredible vulnerability to Jaden's inane phrase had stunned him more than it had anyone else. Zane had tried to resume his regular routine the day afterwards. He'd resisted the urge to follow the flip-flopers to their private beach at the secluded cove. But before the day was out he'd given in to the temptation to summon the group into conference, which had led to Jaden's inevitably trotting out his catch phrase, which had exerted the same influence over Zane as on the previous day. The next day, he'd had an idea of sorts, tortured into a form he found bearable. From what his father had said all those years ago, maybe it wasn't that tickling ought to be avoided completely, but just that it would be a dangerous thing to inflict tickle-torture on Syrus. Possibly his little brother wouldn't be able to stand it. Zane wasn't entirely happy with this conclusion (he recognized a pleasure in his own ticklishness and its power over him that he distrusted by instinct), but it was the best he could do. If he could distract the tickling attention of Atticus' little group, and draw all their tickling to himself, then at least they would leave Syrus alone, and that might be a sort of happy compromise.

With that in mind, Zane had found his way to the beach where Atticus and the others discarded their flip-flops and had their sand duels. At least he'd been able to see to it in the days he'd been attending that Syrus' feet were tickled less and less often, which Syrus himself had hardly seemed to notice in the midst of his excitement over being in on the same activity as his big brother. On the day before Aster had opened the letter from his uncle, Zane had managed to get his feet tickled almost right away, and through some superhuman effort of will had managed to fight the tickling for almost the full duration of time the group of tickling devotees could stay at the cove. Although Zane had resisted actually becoming an official member of the group and wearing his own pair of flip-flops, Atticus had then informed him that he appeared to have de facto accepted membership, and should act like it. Accordingly, and not sure whether to be annoyed or delighted by his enjoyment of the act, Zane had procured the pair of flip-flops Aster had just stopped himself from telling Alexis were in his bag.

Aster asked Alexis, "Has anyone been acting really out of character lately?"

Alexis answered, "Some of the guys definitely haven't been themselves. Syrus is dueling better for no good reason, which you'd think wouldn't worry anyone, but it's definitely out of character. Bastion has started almost missing the answers to questions in class, and Chazz has been polite twice to students in the Slifer Red dorm, which is the one thing that might worry anyone. Jaden and my brother are basically still their same goofy selves. And there's a new student who's gotten into the group, named Tyranno something. I don't know if he's acting unusual or not. But the strain is getting to Zane. He worries a lot about the Academy, I think because he's probably going to be Chancellor here some day in the future, when he retires from the pro circuit. Twice, now, in the last two or three days, Zane has suddenly had to leave the room in the middle of a meeting or some group activity. Once I thought I saw Jaden look at him and whisper something, but I doubt that would have anything to do with it."

"I don't really know anyone well," said Aster, "but I agree that I'd find Chazz being polite to anyone who isn't clearly his equal or superiour very surprising. I may be seeing Zane later this afternoon. If I think there's anything strange worrying him, I'll let you know."

“Thanks so much.” Alexis gave a grateful smile. “Oh, I see a couple of my friends coming towards us. They’ll probably turn into real pests if they meet you; I’ll go head them off.”

“Thanks. Not that I mind meeting people, but I have to think about something.” As Alexis left, Aster began making connections. He had not been sure about there being a connection between Jaden and Atticus, but now it seemed pretty clear. And Atticus was definitely linked to flip-flops, which presumably had something to do with the pair that Zane had just acquired, a pair about which it appeared that Alexis knew nothing. If that should turn out to be because Zane was keeping something secret, then it didn’t seem to be too great a stretch to link Zane to Jaden’s getting his giggle on... very interesting indeed...

Had Aster been less honourable than he was, he’d have learned even more about Zane than he surmised. A quick glance through his uncle’s letter had informed Zane that he’d better study it in private. As Aster and Alexis were conversing, Zane was discovering quite a bit about his family history.

Zane had at first been unsure of what to make of the letter. He knew that his father and uncle had not been on speaking terms for some time. But his uncle had just learned an important piece of Truesdale family history, something important to pass on to the next generation. Zane took the letter to his room and read it carefully.

His uncle wrote of a shocking discovery he’d just made. Zane’s grandmother had given birth to twin boys some five years before his uncle had been born. As the twins had died less than a year after their birth, and as any reference to them sent their mother into a terrible fit of depression, they had been no longer mentioned by anybody. Neither Zane’s uncle nor his father had known of their brothers’ existence until his uncle had discovered that piece of lineage just before writing the letter.

While the fact of the twins’ existence was sad enough, they were an important piece to a Truesdale family puzzle, a piece that had been conspicuous by its absence. Zane and Syrus had puzzled their uncle by their reticence on a certain subject, but learning of his twin brothers had given their uncle the explanation. There was much that they had apparently never been told, which was bound to make a huge difference in their lives.

What Zane had presumably never been told, their uncle wrote, was the story of the central figure in the Truesdale family saga, Terence Truesdale, who had lived and died several centuries ago. Terence Truesdale had been the most intense (and the most talented) foot tickler anyone had ever known. He had begun a practice in his youth of “capturing” his friends and tickling their feet until some time after they begged for more and agreed to let him keep one of their shoes. These shoes he displayed in the top of a tree on his property, so that on a daily basis people would be eager to pass by and see who had been most recently added to Terence’s tickle list. After he’d tickled all his friends and added their shoes to his collection, Terence had branched out, tickling acquaintances and even strangers. Some tried to avoid the encounter, but the greater their resistance the more sure his ultimate victory, such was Terence’s talent. It was not long before he’d acquired the soubriquet of Terry the Tickler, a moniker which changed a little over time until he was known throughout the land as the Terrible Tickler. Eventually, he’d tickled every male in town at or over his minimum age, at which point he’d moved on to a new town and begun tickling the entire populace there. Terence had tickled his way through, at best guess, approximately 654 towns by the time of his death. Legend eventually had it that he was the inspiration for numerous fictional characters with a penchant for tickling, for his fame had spread far and wide during his lifetime and afterwards.

From that day onward, almost every Truesdale son had grown to become passionately devoted to tickling from one end or the other, often both. It was the most persistent family trait. There was, however, one consistent exception to the rule. The fourth son of a fourth son, whenever that phenomenon occurred within the family, could never bear tickling or even any mention of it. And Zane's grandfather, his uncle wrote, had been the fourth son of an only Truesdale child. Therefore, learning of the unmentioned twins had given Zane's uncle the key to understand much about his own life and relationship with his brother.

Zane's and Syrus' father had been the dreaded fourth of a fourth who could not abide tickling. Therefore all the tickling he'd received as a child from his Truesdale-natured-tickle-obsessed brother had been genuine agony for him. It had led to the estrangement between the brothers. Their father might have warned them off, but the fourth-of-a-fourth phenomenon had not yet been discovered, there being no sort of family lore to that effect. A distant cousin who had written the family history all the way back to Terence had been the first to co-ordinate birth order with the aversion to the family passion for tickling, bringing the fact to light only a few months previously, and not communicating the knowledge beyond a small circle within the family.

The knowledge of having submitted his little brother to treatment certain to alienate the fourth son of a fourth son had given Zane's uncle a good deal of unease. He wished he could apologize properly to his brother, whom he had tickled regularly when they were both children. He'd taken his brother's horrified reaction to the family tales of Terence the Terrible Tickler to be the same internally as his own, for he'd feigned horror in the best Truesdale style at the stories of Terence's tickling exploits. He'd never known or

understood properly that his brother's distaste had been so deep and genuine. At this point, an apology was presumably something that probably would go unaccepted. He could live with that. But it had occurred to him that Zane and Syrus, the sons of such a father, might have been very ill-prepared to grow up with the deep family passion for tickling and/or being tickled inside them both. Doubtless tickling or any mention of it had been prohibited in their home when they were younger. And now they were both out in the world, or at least at Duel Academy, perhaps tormenting themselves due to a lack of awareness of their family history. This was a common thing for the sons of a fourth-of-a-fourth, and more especially likely for Zane and Syrus as they had had almost no contact with any of their few extant family connections. There was the knowledge, for good or ill, and, without asking for any intercession with his brother, Zane's uncle presented the story to his nephew for Zane to make of it what he could in the hopes that Zane and Syrus might be spared agony or misunderstanding.

Zane was not sure that he could just trust his uncle. After all, his father was not the sort arbitrarily to break family ties for no reason. There was quite a fair chance that his uncle might have provided some perfectly good reasons for being cut off. But he recalled the agony and the urgency in his father's voice when his father had told him that he must never tickle Syrus again. And then Zane wondered just why the memory

had stuck with him so strongly for all those years. If he were being completely honest with himself, he would acknowledge that the moment struck him as one of the most tragic times in his life. But there had been similar warnings from his father or other people that had not left him with anything like the overpowering feeling of emptiness he'd worked for years to avoid acknowledging. The more Zane thought, the more right this new explanation felt. He still hesitated to embrace it, but he was convinced that it at

least merited testing. And there was one thing he could do. Zane changed into his new flip-flops and left, choosing a route that ran no risk of being observed by Alexis.

Aster had long finished his speculations by the time Zane departed. The little time that had passed had only strengthened Aster's belief that his time here at Duel Academy might have a strong purpose after all. What had appeared to be a rogue interest in tickling on Jaden's part might have been one thing. But if there had sprung up a tickling ring that had come to involve Zane Truesdale, then Aster felt almost sure that a group of such allure might well be a sign of the involvement of his father.

Aster's father had been a card creator with the particular responsibility of being in charge of the line of the Destiny Hero cards that had been the basis of Aster's deck from the moment of his first duel. Dr Phoenix had disappeared shortly after the creation of a Destiny Hero card so powerful that it had been deemed too strong for mass distribution. Most of the people who had assisted Aster in his quest to find his father had assumed that the new Destiny Hero card would be the vital clue to finding Dr Phoenix. But Aster and a small circle of his father's friends thought another line might be more promising.

As a card creator, Dr Phoenix was, naturally, not a competitive duelist or a coach. He had, however, managed to become involved as a training consultant for a group of top-ranking duelists. This group had met regularly at the Phoenix home and experimented with various patent training methods designed to improve their performance.

When the eventual best method of training had been discovered, one member or another of the Phoenix Training Group had won three consecutive World Championships. Naturally this had created heightened interest among other teams and unaffiliated duelists. In time it had been determined by leading analysts that superior play under pressure of competition had been a greater factor in these victories than the strategies or deck building of the various champions. Interest in their training secrets had increased.

The only outsider who ever discovered Dr Phoenix's top training technique had been his son. One night young Aster had been unable to remain asleep. Wandering out of his bedroom to find his father, he'd heard rather a lot of noise coming from the training quarters. He'd crept in to find a strange duel in progress and his father monitoring the play.

"Daddy," Aster had asked, "why are Jeffrey and Artur laughing so much while they duel?"

"It's our new kind of training, Aster. And you gave me the idea for it."

"I did?"

"Oh, yes. Do you remember when I was asking you the multiplication tables and your kitten came and put his big, fluffy tail in between your toes?"

"I remember. I like when Kitty does that; it tickles," he'd said, giggling.

"And you kept answering the multiplication questions I asked you, but it wasn't easy for you. Well, that gave me the idea to see if it helped the people in our training group to improve their dueling to see how well they could duel with their feet being tickled. Only instead of Kitty the others are tickling Jeffrey's and Artur's feet while they're dueling. All the duelists are taking turns dueling while their feet are tickled. It helps them improve their concentration so that when they have real duels against difficult opponents they can remain calm and not get too excited about dueling."

Aster had been very pleased and proud to have helped inspire one of his father's best training methods. Later, when his father had disappeared, he'd wondered if his father's vanishing had been connected to tickle training in any way. He'd always thought it likely, sometimes more so and sometimes less so. But the possibility never entirely left his head as time continued to pass and his search went on.

Any organized group indulging in tickling activity was likely to pique Aster's interest at least until he made certain that his father had not been involved with the group at all. But any group involving top duelists always seemed worth extra-careful attention. And here was a group which had recently added one of the best - Zane Truesdale - at least, if Aster's guesses were correct. On that front, he felt fairly secure. Now exactly why his father should have established such a group, and under what motivations, Aster could never entirely decide. He'd like to think the whole thing quite blameless, but could not be completely certain. Still, he'd managed to keep believing that he would find out in time.

Aster then tried to get some reading done. This was proving to be less than a notable success. Then he gave up trying to read, went to a window and noticed Zane walking somewhere quickly. Zane - in more of a hurry than Aster might ever have thought natural for him - and, as Aster saw, wearing flip-flops.

By the time Aster had gotten out of doors and reached the approximate spot where Zane had been walking, Zane was well out of sight. This was no particular cause for worry. Aster might not have had Ty's exceptional skill for tracking, or Zane's sixth sense of where Syrus might likely be found. But in this situation Aster's sixth sense proved just as useful.

Guided by instinct, Aster moved almost sightlessly through the grounds of the Academy and towards what he was certain of finding. And find it he did. Glimpsing the pile of discarded flip-flops as he turned the last corner to reach the preferred viewing point at the secret cove, Aster arrived just in time to witness the tail end of Zane challenging all six of the others, vowing to defeat the lot of them in a maximum of twenty-five turns. Zane would also allow each of the six to choose whether to go first or second after drawing his opening hand.

Aster was impressed by Zane's challenge. He'd seen other top duelists issue challenges of that to groups of decent opponents, but usually they retained the privilege of going first themselves in order to set up some high-powered combination play. Zane could not have tricked up his deck excessively. Also, with the limit on number of turns he would presumably not be using cards like Future Fusion or Different Dimension Capsule, which required waiting a couple of turns before getting powerful cards into hand or onto the field.

Aster watched the other six deciding on the order in which they would duel Zane. Then his glance wandered about to take in details of the little secluded beach where they were meeting. For a moment his eyes were held by the pile of flip-flops. His toes wiggled once or twice, as if anticipating that they'd be getting the opportunity to come out and play. But the impulse to shed his own shoes and join the little group passed. After all, he was here on his quest. He watched.

And what Aster saw was a great display of power dueling from Zane. Cyber End Dragon and Chimeratech Overdragon were brought out almost at once in duel after duel and mowed down all competition. Syrus lost on Zane's second turn. Only Atticus required five turns to defeat. In the end, Zane beat all six opponents in a total of nineteen turns. Aster admitted to himself that he was really impressed. Zane seemed to have dueled with an incredibly strong sense of purpose.

Zane, having dispatched his six opponents, was then quite decided about his prize. He ordered them to line up in order of foot size, lying in a row on the sand. Aster almost laughed out loud to see the comical line of bare feet ranging from Ty's big dogs on one end down all the way to Syrus' little tootsies on the other. Zane, who had never before tickled anyone else within the confines of the flip-flop group, then announced that he only had a limited time to remain with them.

"I have to be back for a meeting in an hour. So today will be just a preliminary. When I have more time, I intend to bury you all in the sand. But I have a second challenge for myself today. I think I can get you all to go crazy in a total of half an hour."

Zane then had them all grab each other's hands, bringing Syrus over to the other end when he started on Ty. Then he tickled his way down the line as ruthlessly and efficiently as he'd dueled. Ty's trained resistance, Chazz' arrogant egoism, Atticus' spiritual resolve all were mowed down. One by one, they burst into laughter nearly at once, shocked by Zane's unexpected expertise. Bastion and Jaden were unable and unwilling to put up any resistance at all. By the time Zane had Jaden in hysterics, he still had a good fourteen minutes left for Syrus. He warned his little brother to be prepared for something he should have gotten a long time ago.

Aster watched with interest as Zane tickled his brother's bare feet with an almost demonic intensity. Syrus, for his part, was in agonies of torture at once. But there was more to it than that. Zane seemed even more dedicated in tickling Syrus than he'd seemed in tickling any of the others, though Syrus didn't offer any particular difficulties in the matter of forcing laughter. And Syrus seemed, despite his ticklish agony, to have found some sense of peace or rightness about the universe. Aster, who frequently admitted to himself how one of his fondest wishes would be to be tickled by his father again, immediately felt a strange sort of sympathy with Syrus and sensed that Syrus hadn't been tickled by Zane for a longer time than suited him. There was definitely an aura of some sense of rightness being restored to the universe. And Zane seemed more mesmerized by Syrus' little barefeet than he'd been by all the bigger feet he'd just tickled.

Aster mentally filed away these impressions. They might have nothing to do with his quest. But there was certainly a good deal of potential in this group. For an instant, Aster was again nearly on the brink of removing his shoes and joining the others, but just then Zane's time for tickling Syrus came to an end. Aster was just able to get away before Zane got up, dug through the pile of flip-flops for his, stuck his bare feet into them, and headed back to the main buildings. Aster, who watched Zane go, then thought of joining the remaining six. They seemed to be continuing their practice, and there ought to be at least a good time to be had. But he still hesitated. This group definitely seemed connected to his mission in some way. He wanted to think things out carefully. Resisting temptation, Aster returned to his own room.

The following day's mail brought Aster the answer that overnight he'd almost come to expect. The Sacred Dueling Room... 4:15... he would be further along on his quest. Aster was quietly pleased.

4:15, and Aster entered the Sacred Dueling Room right on time. He smiled ever so slightly to himself as he removed his shoes in the antechamber. He'd always liked seeing pictures of dressed-up young men with bare feet when he'd been a boy. Pity he hadn't had as much opportunity as he might have liked to be a rule-breaker. He left the anteroom, entered the Sacred Dueling Room proper, and saw the robed and hooded stranger for the first time.

"You are, of course, Aster Phoenix," spoke the digitized voice. "You understand the terms?"

“I do.”

“If you win our duel, I provide you with the assistnace you require. If you don’t, you assist me. Do you agree?”

“I agree.”

“Then we duel. You’re welcome to go first.”

“Thank you.” They readied their duel disks and drew their cards. Aster began. “I’ll start with Destiny Draw. I discard Destiny Hero - Dasher to the graveyard and then draw two cards. Now I’ll set a monster in defence mode and a face-down card and end my turn.”

The stranger seemed pleased with the opening draw. “I’ll start with a special summon of Cyber Dragon. And if you’re drawing extra cards, I’d better reduce your hand size, so I’ll add Spirit Reaper. Now, Cyber Dragon will attack your defensive monster, and when Spirit Reaper attacks directly, you’ll have to discard a card from your hand.”

“But my defensive monster is Destiny Hero - Defender,” said Aster, “so it isn’t destroyed.” This was true, as Defender had 2700 DEF, more than enough to withstand Cyber Dragon’s 2100 ATK. The stranger’s life points went down from 8000 to 7400. The stranger set one card to end the turn.

Aster drew. “It’s another Destiny Hero - Dasher,” he said, “and I can use the effect of the Dasher in my graveyard to special summon this one.” When the other chose not to respond, Aster went on, “Now I’ll destroy Spirit Reaper by trying to equip it with Divine Sword - Phoenix Blade.”

“And I’ll activate Raigeki Break to destroy your Destiny Hero - Dasher.” The stranger discarded Treeborn Frog to the graveyard as the activation cost.

“I think that was a mistake,” said Aster. “First I’ll make sure you don’t get a draw from Defender’s effect and tribute Defender to summon my Destiny Hero - Double Dude. Now I can remove Defender and the first Dasher from my graveyard to return the Divine Sword to my hand. Then I can equip it to Double Dude and end my turn.”

“As I have no spells or traps in play, I can special summon Treeborn Frog from the graveyard. But it won’t stay on the field long. I tribute Treeborn Frog for Zaborg the Thunder Monarch. When Zaborg is tribute summoned, I must destroy one monster on the field, so I’ll destroy Double Dude.”

“That doesn’t matter,” said Aster, as I’ll clear the field of monsters with my face-down Torrential Tribute.”

“Then all I can do is set one card and end my turn.”

Aster drew. “I didn’t get a monster I can special summon with my second Dasher’s effect, but I won’t need it. First, in my Standby Phase, because my Double Dude was destroyed, I get two Double Dude Tokens. Next, I play a second Destiny Draw. This time, I’ll discard Destiny Hero - Malicious, so that I can then remove him from play to special summon another Malicious from my deck. As I still have my regular summon, I’ll use it for Elemental Hero Stratos, which lets me take any Elemental Hero or Destiny Hero from my deck into my hand. And I choose Destiny Hero - Dogma, which I can special summon by tributing Malicious and my two tokens.”

“Then I activate my trap - Black Horn of Heaven, to negate that last summon and destroy Dogma, so that I won’t have to lose half my life points in your next turn from Dogma’s effect.”

Aster removed Dogma and Double Dude from play to reclaim his Divine Sword, equipped it to Stratos, the only card left on the field, and attacked. The stranger’s life points dropped to 5300. Then Aster set a card and ended his turn.

The stranger drew, and brought Treeborn Frog back in defence position. “I’ll put one more monster in defence position, and end my turn with one card in my hand.”

Aster really liked his draw. “I think you’ll regret bringing back your Treeborn Frog,” he said, showing the card he drew. “I drew a monster I can special summon with my second Dasher’s effect, and I will - one of my favourite Destiny Heroes, my Diamond Dude. I think I’ll choose defence mode. And now it’s time for my face-down card - Inferno Reckless Summon. Because I just special summoned a monster with an attack

strength of 1500 or less while you have a monster on the field, I can summon up to two more copies from my hand, deck or graveyard, and you can summon copies of any face-up card you control. But your only face-up card is Treeborn Frog, and that’s limited to one per deck. So that’s two more monsters for me, and none for you. Now I’ll activate

Diamond Dude’s effect. If the top card on my deck is a normal spell card, I send it to the graveyard and then I can activate the effect on my next turn without paying the cost. Since I have three Diamond Dudes, I can look at my top three cards - and look at this! Dimension Fusion, Lightning Vortex and Heavy Storm. So much for your monsters, spells and traps next turn! Heavy Storm first to clear your traps away, then Dimension Fusion to fill any monster zones I have open with monsters removed from play, and finally Lightning Vortex to destroy all your monsters. I won’t even attack you now. To be as safe as I can be, I’ll switch Stratos to defence mode and end my turn. You might manage to hang on for another turn or two if you get lucky and find a stalling card, but I’ll be way ahead.”

The stranger seemed displeased with the draw. “Thousand-Eyes Restrict won’t help me here - who ever said that it’s no good playing Horus the Black Flame Dragon LV8 in a Monarch deck? That would be the only way to stop your spells effectively - or Silent Swordsman LV7. Well, even though it won’t really help, Ill bring out Cyber-Stein anyway. I might as well go out in a blaze of glory. I’ll pay the 5000 life point price to bring out a fusion monster - why not Gatling Dragon, just to see how many of those annoying Diamond Dudes I can wipe out?” Three coin tosses followed. When all three turned up Heads, the stranger seemed wryly pleased. “Not that it really matters, but I can destroy your Diamond Dudes with Gatling Dragon’s effect, and now it will attack Stratos, so goodbye to your field presence. And just for style points, I’ll attack with Cyber-Stein. Maybe I should have switched Treeborn Frog to attack mode just for a little extra ding, but I didn’t, which means that all I can do is set one card and end my last turn.” Aster’s life points, reduced for the first time, stood at 7300.

Aster drew, still half suspecting a trick. “So that really was your last turn? Are you conceding?”

“Yes and no.”

“Well, then, I’ll start with Heavy Storm’s effect.”

“It makes no difference. Whatever you do, I’ll chain my trap card - Self-Destruct Button. I

have a confession to make. I didn't change Treeborn Frog to attack mode on purpose. Self-Destruct Button can only activate when I have fewer life points than my opponent and the difference is at least 7000, and of course our score is exactly 7300-300. Now both our Life Points become zero."

"So the duel is a draw," said Aster. "What, do we duel again?"

"Not at all," said the other. "You give me the assistance I require."

"But you didn't win," said Aster.

"I didn't have to win. Remember exactly what I said."

Of course! Closing his eyes and shaking his head, Aster recalled that the agreement had been based on whether he had won or not won rather than which of the two of them had won, in which case a draw would have led to either a cancellation or a replay. But as it was, he hadn't won, and therefore was obliged to yield to the request of the other.

At the stranger's direction, Aster entered the Secret Chamber. The scene he beheld was curious. Unlike the seven earlier occasions when one of the Academy boys had entered that chamber, Aster was not alone with the mysterious stranger. Syrus, Chazz, Jaden, Bastion, Atticus, Ty and Zane were arranged in seven parts of a circle on their tables.

The tables themselves were different as well. They were all about half the length they had been previously, and were a good deal higher as well. The boys were strapped down by their legs only, and sat at one end, their bared feet extending just clear of the opposite edge. An eighth table, empty, completed the circle. Aster stared at the other seven boys and then at the empty table.

The stranger addressed the seven. "We have a slight variation in the programme today. Aster's duel was a draw."

"A draw? And you didn't duel again?" Zane sounded incredulous.

"I would have had to win," explained Aster. "But... what are you all... did each of you have a duel out there too?" he asked.

"We all lost," explained Atticus, "so at least you improved on the result."

"But what I don't understand," went on Aster, "is why. I know why I came here. I'm on a quest. But what about all of you?"

"I wanted to know how to fit in at a new school," said Ty.

"I just wanted to stop being ashamed of myself" sighed Syrus.

"I'm trying to make sense of my history," explained Atticus.

"I wanted to stop being overlooked," admitted Bastion.

"I thought I'd find out how to beat Jaden consistently," said Chazz.

"I came to try to help my brother, but there was more to it than that," Zane spoke warily.

Jaden was unaware for a moment that the others were waiting for him to say something. “Oh, me? I just never back down from a challenge!” he said breezily.

Some of the others gave Jaden a Look, but Aster said that not everything had to be Deep and Meaningful.

“Aster,” asked the stranger, “would you please take your place? Then we can begin.”

Aster climbed onto his table. Soon he was strapped down as securely as all the others. The stranger then addressed the group.

“As Aster has made the eighth member of your little society here, it seemed like a good time to hold a little tournament. There are eight of you, and you can all help me to test some of our new technology. I doubt any of you have noticed this, but the portion of the tables on which you’re all sitting is made of a special new material that will erode in reaction to movement. If someone were to tickle your feet long enough, eventually your squirming would cause your seat to wear away and you would topple backwards. The backs of your tables are padded to prevent injury when that occurs. Additionally, a large elevated cushion will be placed behind each of you to break the fall. These devices have been tested with people weighing far more than any of you, and have been completely reliable to date.”

“So, there we are. You’ll tickle each other’s feet with the object of making your opponents squirm around enough to erode their seats and fall back, which amounts to elimination.”

“Tickle each other’s feet?” asked Chazz, “how, exactly?”

“A good question.” The stranger gave a signal to his assistants, who brought forth a large supply of poles. “You all seem to resemble a group of latter-day knights riding into the joust. We have therefore provided you with a fun type of lance, only with a tip designed to tickle instead of pierce.” The boys looked, seeing that all the lances were equipped with feather dusters on the end. “And the lengths are exactly calculated,” the stranger went on as the hooded assistants distributed the lances to the boys, “to facilitate easy tickling of whoever’s at the opposite end of the circle. I thought we’d start with a little free-for-all to get you all used to your weapons. Then we’ll replace your seats and have a proper knockout draw.”

“A free-for-all - sweet!” cried Jaden.

“And there will be a prize for the winner. There will also be a prize for the winner of the tournament proper. Now, we’ll give you a moment to get used to the handling of your weapons.” There was a pause while the boys accustomed themselves to holding and moving their lances, which fortunately were sufficiently light that they proved relatively easy to handle. The assistants during this time positioned the large cushions behind each of the boys. “Then, we’ll count down to the beginning. 5... 4... 3... 2... 1... TICKLE!!!”

With varying degrees of accuracy but approximately equal enthusiasm, the eight lances were lowered into position, aimed, and extended to meet and tickle immobilized barefeet. Soon a squeal was heard as the first tickling lance found its target. Little yelps and shrieks of giggles peppered the room briefly, then caught momentum like a bag of popcorn in a microwave as the chuckles and giggles became contagious around the

circle and soon all eight combatants were laughing steadily and trying not to squirm despite the erratic but effective tickling each was receiving to a greater or lesser degree from the weapons of the others.

Syrus, who had the hardest time controlling his lance and the hardest time not squirming, soon squirmed enough to erode his seat, lose his balance and topple back onto the waiting cushion, out of the competition. This might have boded well for Aster, who was opposite Syrus in the circle. However, Jaden was next to Syrus. Wanting to hear Aster get his giggle on, Jaden concentrated almost 100% of his efforts on tickling Aster with sufficient enthusiasm that Aster quickly began squirming enough to suspect through his laughter that he wouldn't last long, especially when Ty, on Syrus' other side, joined in.

Atticus, on Ty's other side, went at it with his opposite number, Chazz. Then they noticed that Ty and his opposing combatant Zane, who seemed the two most skilled with the lances, stopped tickling each other, perhaps afraid of knocking each other out through superiour tickling while someone else coasted to victory. Zane got in a couple of devastating tickles on Atticus while Ty took some pokes at Aster. Chazz, thinking

Ty likely to be a tough rival, went after him.

Noone else had been eliminated yet, though Jaden, Atticus and Aster were laughing pretty hard, squirming around, and seemed to be on the brink, when Chazz finally realized something. By the time he could muster enough breath to say something, he gasped, "Ja-hey-heyden, haven't you been tickling Bastion?"

"NOHOHO, Aster!" Jaden answered. Just then Atticus got in a wicked tickle between his toes, Jaden gave as big a leap as he could into the air, and the last portion of his seat eroded. Jaden fell back just as Aster slipped away at the same moment, and Atticus followed a few seconds later. In the general astonishment of the moment, things briefly quieted down as the four ticklers remaining stared at the three who'd been knocked out.

Chazz quickly called out, "Ty, Zane, Jaden never tickled Bastion! We'd better work together because he's way ahead!"

And Bastion did have a big lead. The benefit of Jaden tickling Aster exclusively, and Chazz concentrating on Atticus and Ty, was that he'd gone nearly untickled, and he'd barely squirmed at all, leaving his seat much more firm than that of any of the others. Perhaps there were times when there were advantages to be derived from being under the radar, though Bastion did give a small sigh over having been overlooked again. Now he suddenly found himself the focus of three ruthless opponents, and was soon shrieking louder with laughter than anyone else had done earlier. But the lead was too big, and Bastion was able to get in enough additional tickles to push Chazz into those last few squirms to take out the seat, then Ty and Zane almost at the same moment about a minute later, just before Bastion himself, still feeling phantom tickles, fell back exhausted.

Victory for Bastion was declared as the eight boys lay back, panting and giggling. When Chazz finally recovered himself enough to complain about Jaden tickling Aster the whole time and letting Bastion go untickled, the stranger initiated the next portion of the programme. As some assistants gathered up the lances, which had all dropped to the floor at some point during or after the free-for-all, others

brought out replacement seats, or lifted the boys up and held them forward while the new seats were locked into place, then pushed the tables back a bit to clear some space.

The stranger said, “We will now have our head-to-head, or perhaps I should call it foot-to-foot, tournament. It will be a simple knockout format. I have already done up the draw. These tickling matches will be held in rounds of varying length. You won’t know how long each round will be. Now, for the first duel, bring out Tyranno Hasselberry and Aster Phoenix!”

“The two new guys - sweet!” cried Jaden.

As Ty and Aster were pushed into positions on the marks, Zane asked Atticus, “What do you think?”

“Beats me,” Atticus tossed off with a shrug. “Ty’s got much bigger feet and they could be a target, but he’s had training to withstand tickling. I have no guess.”

Syrus just sighed and hoped he wouldn’t draw Zane. Bastion tried not to stare in Ty’s direction. Chazz decided that he’d be better off in this part of the draw.

The tickle match began. In the first round, Aster seemed to find a good spot on the ball of Ty’s right foot, but got no more than a couple of half-laughs. Aster made a little progress in the second round, but Ty found a good rhythm to brush his duster across Aster’s toes, which quickly brought out a very musical laugh out of Aster.

Aster’s laugh made a favourable impression on Jaden, who had more wits than usual about him and managed not to say anything. Ty continued in the next round, varying his attack and getting a steady stream of laughter out of Aster, who, as best he could, plugged away at the same spot.

It looked as if Ty were in control. Zane, however, realized something. Ty might not have been laughing, but he was squirming a lot more than Aster, despite all Aster’s laughter. Maybe it was hard for most of the others to see past his big feet to notice that as well. Zane thought that Ty might have been trained against laughter rather than squirming, and he was right. Just as most of the watchers were mentally writing after off, Ty wore out what was left of his seat and fell back in defeat.

As Ty’s and Aster’s tables were pushed away and the two of them were given new seats, the next match was announced. “Atticus Rhodes and Syrus Truesdale!”

Zane disliked this pairing intensely. His best friend against his little brother - how could he pull for one against the other? Chazz frowned, thinking that this match was the other quarter in Aster’s half of the draw. Jaden encouraged Syrus to do his best. The first round didn’t go too badly for Syrus. Having little feet was an advantage, and he managed to get a good stroke up and down Atticus’ arch that made him think he might even have a slight lead.

At the end of the round, Bastion, who had been watching Atticus intently, had a question. “Atticus, when you’re just about to thrust for that rotating tickle of yours, do you inhale or exhale?”

Atticus shrugged. “Beats me.” As the next round began, he completely forgot the question.

Syrus wondered, though. When the round began, he found himself watching Atticus when he should have been trying to wriggle his feet away from the most extreme tickles of the feathery lance. Even worse, he then tried to follow his own breathing as he worked his own weapon, and found he couldn't do a thing with it. Atticus quickly gained the upper hand, and got the win before the second round ended.

“Bastion Misawa and Jaden Yuki!”

“Sweet!” cried Jaden. “Get ready to...” but he was hushed before he could finish the sentence.

Amidst the collective groan over Jaden's lack of originality, Jaden and Bastion were placed into position. Atticus mouthed to Zane, “Bastion should win, shouldn't he?”

“He probably ought to win,” Zane mouthed back, “but it would be foolish to count Jaden out.”

As the match began, Bastion worked his lance with true scientific accuracy, aiming the feathers right at Jaden's most sensitive spots. Jaden just basically made contact anywhere he could. Also, being the more irrepressible, Jaden was soon laughing louder and squirming more. Wanting the battle to last, however, he made a serious effort and didn't succumb. Bastion steadily increased his lead, however.

Between rounds they actually chatted. Jaden was enjoying himself too much to be taciturn. Bastion was feeling a pride in his technique similar to that of some villain from children's television who brags to the hero about the brilliant plan the hero will be unable to foil.

Just before the start of the fourth round, after Bastion finished explaining how he'd determined that Jaden's left sole would be more ticklish than his right, Jaden exclaimed, “Hey, I've just thought of something! Can you imagine what Dr Crowler would say if he could see us now? He's never had too high an opinion of me, but he'd probably accuse you of joining the slackers! Or your father; you've told me how uptight he is. I bet he'd have something pretty harsh to say. Though what would be funnier still - what if they were both here, only instead of telling us off they actually joined in?” The fourth round began.

Bastion could not even begin to contemplate his father and Dr Crowler engaged in a tickle fight. But Jaden's speculation about what his father would say struck him. Bastion realized that he'd been worried about that at the back of his mind all these weeks. And why? What difference would it really make what harsh thing his father might say? When it came down to it, what did he care? He'd been tying himself in

knots about his father ever since his first visit here, enjoying himself almost against his will and practically giving himself ulcers. Thinking of all the things he'd refused, like the fun he could have had with Ty (whose enormous feet had haunted him, sometimes during class, as he wondered what they would be like to tickle or even taste), made his blood boil. Aiming a tickle, Bastion thought it would serve his father right to be brought in here and strapped to one of these tables. And, Bastion thought, if the pater cried out to him to release him, he wouldn't. Maybe he'd even give him what he deserved. He'd certainly do whatever he wanted to do instead of continuing all this repression.

Bastion still wanted to win this tickling duel, however. But just then, he took a quick look around, his gaze drawn as if magnetized to Ty's huge bare feet. He tried to look away back to Jaden, but that would have been tearing him away from what he wanted to keep regarding. His lance moved haphazardly, missing completely, but all Bastion wanted to do was to keep watching the way Ty's soles crinkled. As Jaden caught up in the duel Bastion wanted something else - he wanted to laugh.

And he was going to laugh. Bastion lowered his lance, kept his eyes fixed firmly in Ty's direction and laughed steadily, not feeling anything until his seat presently gave way and he fell backwards.

Jaden was as surprised as anyone. "I must be really good at this - sweet!" he cried.

When Jaden and Bastion had been removed from the field, it was time for Zane vs Chazz. Chazz thought he had a decent chance here. His feet were long and narrow, and had a good chance of being able to twist away from Zane's tickles, while Zane's wider feet might twist into his if he managed them correctly. The first round ended almost dead even.

Then Syrus called out, "Come on, big brother, you can do it!" Big brother, Chazz thought to himself. He'd forgotten that aspect of things, but recalled it now as images of his own older siblings came into his head. Zane had all the authority of an older brother, the authority that was the one thing he himself was lacking. As the second round progressed, Chazz felt Zane gradually taking control of the match. Between the end of that round and the third, he assessed the sense of inevitability he was feeling, and decided there was only one thing to be done.

As the third round began, Chazz called out, "I can't believe I'm really saying this, but Zane - time to get your giggle on!" He waited for Zane's habitual reaction to the phrase.

But nothing came of it. Chazz waited. Jaden waited. The other boys waited. The stranger and assistants waited. Even Zane seemed to be waiting for a moment. But the moment passed and Zane remained impassive - until he connected with a devastating tickle right in the centre of Chazz' right sole. Chazz shrieked in both ticklishness and vexation. What had gone wrong? That stupid phrase always reduced Zane to hysterics. It couldn't possibly be... because Jaden actually seemed to mean it, could it? Whatever the reason, without that phrase as a trump card, Chazz knew he was lost. An older brother would always be able to dominate a younger brother. Chazz' attempts to suppress his squirming slackened. His seat collapsed just as the third round was ending.

As the semifinalists were being given new seats, Syrus asked if Aster had had a guess at the stranger's identity yet.

"No," replied the stranger, "that will come at the end of the tournament."

"What's this?" asked Aster. "I don't understand."

Several of the other boys explained at once that each week they had a chance to guess the stranger's identity, as either a successful guess or victory in a duel was the only way they would be relieved of the obligation to return week after week for another tickling. Aster looked as if something were beginning to make sense for him. But he said no more at the moment.

After a suitable interval, it was time for the semifinal matches. First up was Atticus-Aster. This ought to have been a better match than it turned out to be. Atticus found it too difficult to focus. For one thing, he was less competitive than the other three semifinalists. It had been this that had kept him half a step behind Zane all their time at Duel Academy. And he might have to go up against Zane if he won. For another, the combination of Aster's suit and bare feet was way too distracting. Despite (or perhaps because of) his own uber-casual style, Atticus had a huge thing for barefoot guys in business or formal attire. He thought too often about how he'd have to get Aster into some of his best flip-flops; that would look SO HOT!!! And as much fun as the tournament was, he'd like even better the opportunity to have a

private go at those barefeet with his hands (or even his tongue)... and the next thing Atticus knew the match was over; he'd lost (all too soon).

Then came Jaden versus Zane. This was over even more quickly. Zane was debating with himself whether or not he ought to appeal to Jaden's sense of fair play and ask him not to say it when Jaden came out with it. "Okay, Zane - time to GET YOUR GIGGLE ON!!!"

Zane shrieked. He couldn't believe he was so powerless to stop that silly phrase from driving him into complete hysterics. But there was just something about the way Jaden said it. "Ohohohoh, come ohahahahon, don't SAY that!!!" he cried.

"Don't say what?" babbled Jaden, in a rare instance of being coy instead of, as usual, genuinely being unaware of what he was doing that was contributing to someone's reactions. "Get Your Giggle On? I suppose you have to mean Get Your Giggle On, because all I said was Get Your Giggle On! What's wrong with my saying Get Your Giggle On? I mean, if Get Your Giggle On were so powerful, then why doesn't everyone just double over and laugh like a hyena whenever I say Get Your Giggle On? So why does my saying Get Your Giggle On get to you, Zane? What makes you react like that when I say Get Your Giggle On? Anyone would think my saying Get Your Giggle On makes you wanna, like, well, Get Your Giggle On! So if you wanna Get Your Giggle On whenever you hear me say Get Your Giggle On, then all I can say about that is GET YOUR GIGGLE ON!!!!!"

And Zane had thought he was in hysterics the first time? Each utterance of that silly phrase made it exponentially worse. It was almost as if he'd been hypnotized and Jaden's phrase triggered his post-hypnotic suggestion. Zane knew he was lost before Jaden was even halfway through his litany. It was impossible to appeal or beg or plead or implore or supplicate or even surrender. Zane became one complete mass of uncontrollable laughter, barely noticing Jaden's tickling lance, becoming only less controllable until mercifully his squirming was enough to erode his seat and send him toppling back, still shrieking.

Although all of the other boys except for Aster had already witnessed the power Jaden's catch phrase had over Zane, none of them had ever seen such a potent example. For a moment after the end of the match there was complete silence. Then Jaden said at last, "Wow, that really worked! Too bad I didn't say Get Your Giggle On when we dueled yesterday. I might have lasted more than three turns."

Another short interval followed before the final match of Aster versus Jaden. The other six boys discussed the pairing amongst themselves. Of Ty and Bastion, each hoped that his earlier loss would be mollified by proving to have gone out to the eventual champion. Zane thought that Jaden had had a lucky draw so that Aster should win, while Atticus backed Jaden because he thought it would be incredible to see Aster go through the whole process of losing. Syrus hated siding against his brother but couldn't go against Jaden, while Chazz hated siding with Zane but couldn't bring himself to back Jaden.

When the finalists were in position, Jaden asked, "So, Aster, anything to say before we get started?" This surprised most of the others, who'd expected Jaden to come out with his catch phrase. Presumably he was just giving Aster a chance to say something first.

Aster replied, "The only thing I can think of, dude, is to ask if you're ready to get your giggle on."

"Sweet!" Jaden cried with a little laugh. "Sure thing, bro!"

Chazz and Atticus both gasped. Each felt a sudden rise of hysterical panic on hearing Aster uttering Jaden's pet catch phrase, but managed to conceal it well enough, especially as Bastion, Ty and Syrus, expecting Jaden to say it, were all watching Zane. It would likely provide future food for thought that Jaden saying those four words evoked no stronger reaction than an urge to groan, while the same words spoken by Aster practically sent them into orbit. Privately, Chazz also wondered why nobody had reacted hysterically, so far as he could tell, when he'd said the magic words against Zane.

Then Jadena and Aster lowered their lances and began tickling each other. It looked like a fairly even matchup to the others. It was Jaden and his sense of fun against Aster and his musical laugh. Which would prove more vulnerable?

For a couple of rounds, Jaden and Aster matched each other heel to heel, arch to arch, sole to sole, toe to toe, giggle to giggle. The others marveled at the musical quality of Aster's laughter, especially that none of them could think of any more satisfactory adjective than the vague "musical" to describe whatever it was in it that struck them as rare and strange. Jaden had more fun than ever, and Aster felt an even stronger sense of purpose than he knew.

Atticus pointed something out to Zane. "Look at Aster," he whispered. "He might have been different in the free-for-all, but now he's a laugher, not a squirmer. He's actually way ahead, though it looks dead even. I think it was the same way in his first match with Ty."

Zane agreed, just before Jaden lost his seat, ending the tournament.

Aster's victory was proclaimed by the stranger. The other boys gave him a long round of applause. Then the stranger's assistants released the eight boys from their strapped-in positions. They all lowered themselves carefully to the ground, stretching out of their stiffness.

Ty recovered first and asked, "So what prize does Aster get for winning?"

"Or does he have to guess who you are now are?" asked Syrus.

"Syrus is correct," said the stranger. "It is time for Aster to guess my identity. In fact, I suppose it would be fair to say that his prize for winning the tournament depends on his guess."

One or two of the other boys wondered at this, but Aster did not pause. "I've been considering this," he said. "Before I came to this room today, I thought there was a very good chance that you might turn out to be my father. But I'd know if you were my father, and you're not. I think you've worked with him, though. I don't really remember the names of all his assistants, but think you're one of them."

The stranger gave Aster a long look, then said, "For you, I almost wish I could be. But no. And now for the prizes. Would you all go behind that partition? There are little cubicles where you can change."

Each of the boys was assisted to a makeshift changing room containing his bathing suit. The changes were accomplished quickly. The eight boys filed back out together to see a single full-length table of a sort seven of them recognized, only with what appeared to be rather fewer straps.

"We have had a momentous day today. You boys are now eight in number," said the stranger, "and the eighth among you has proven himself to be worthy of a most special induction into your group. Aster, if you would care to take the place of honour, we can proceed," indicating the table.

Aster studied the table for a moment, then climbed on, as some of the others thought of questions. As Aster was being strapped in, rather loosely and in a shape that was almost exactly between an X and a Y, Chazz finally asked, “Why did we change into our bathing suits? We’ve never done this before.”

“It seemed the more practical course of action,” replied the stranger. “Now perhaps the rest of you will take your places. Zane, if you’d be so good as to go to the top left, and Jaden the top right. That’s exactly right. Now Chazz to the upper-mid-left and Atticus the upper-mid-right... good, Syrus to the lower-mid-left and Tyranno the lower-mid-right... yes, that’s it, and then, for winning the free-for-all, Bastion you have the bottom of the table all to yourself.” It took very little time for the seven boys to position themselves as directed. “Very good, you are all in your places. Now put on a good show and welcome Aster into your little fraternity.”

“What, all seven of us tickle Aster at once?” asked Ty. “Not all seven at full strength. Sam Hill! He’ll pass out, won’t he?”

“I think not. Aster has survived a great deal, and it’s actually essential that you give him your best. Afterwards, there may be time for each of you to provide a taste of his individual skill, but at the moment it will be a group welcome. Shall we say on a count from ten? Perhaps Aster will do the honours himself.”

Aster duly counted down from ten to zero, maintaining an even pace. His seven ticklers synchronized themselves perfectly with his counting. Noone jumped the gun or lagged behind. Like the best Swiss clockwork, on the rounding of the letter O in zero, Aster felt the impact as seventy tickling fingers all struck in unison.

At first, despite what he’d expected, Aster felt almost too shocked to laugh or react at all. That lasted a mere instant. Then his clear laugh rang out - the laugh that had all the allure of the Pied Piper’s pipe, the laugh that could have made a dedicated tickler out of those who had long foresworn all human contact, or, in this case, the laugh that almost brought Aster’s seven ticklers to a full halt before they redoubled their efforts in order to keep it going as long as they could. But with such overwhelming simultaneous tickling literally all over his body, Aster could not prolong that laughter indefinitely. After some minutes, it yielded to a squeal, a sort of staccato bark, and almost silent convulsions in turn, each of which maintained almost the same charm over its hearers as the laugh had done.

As for Aster himself, things began to connect as he felt himself being tickled almost into a different dimension - maybe, the thought flickered through with some amusement, the same different dimension as in the card game, in the instance of cards like D.D. Warrior and D.D. Survivor. He could call himself a D.D. Survivor if he made it through this tickling with his sanity intact. Too bad that monster wouldn’t really fit into his deck with its Destiny Heroes. Other thoughts flashed through what little piece of consciousness

Aster could retain from the sensations of being tickled all over. The stranger’s use of the word fraternity now seemed - well, destined. Equally destined was the way Jaden had called him bro just before they had begun the final match of the tickling tournament. As accidental as those two words might have seemed at the time, Aster sensed a significance in them, an essence that called to him through the medium of his delirious delight in the tickling he was receiving. It was an essence that let him distinguish and revel in every detail of the experience beyond natural capacity. Aster reveled in all the silly teasing phrases Jaden uttered as quickly as he could think of them (and which made Get

Your Giggle On sound like a lecture on brain surgery), in the masterly way Zane circled infinitesimally closer to the most ticklish spots of his armpit and chest before swooping in at the exact moment of perfect ticklishness (in a manner perhaps not duplicated since the days of Terence Truesdale himself), in the dancing way Chazz' long, narrow fingers played his ribs like piano keys (which in the due course of time would be told to Chazz himself, and would eventually lead to the Princeton catch phrase that it was time to make a little Chazz music), in the gloriously inelegant noises Atticus made blowing raspberries on his stomach (as well as the delicious way Atticus' tongue lapped at his navel as if at an ice cream cone), in Ty's demonstration with full military precision of his perfect knowledge of the exact anatomy of the human knee and all its most entertaining points of interest (even to the point of Ty actually removing his cherished dinosaur helmet and using it as part of his tickle), in the tentative fluttering of shy Syrus' little hands on his thigh (a touch which Syrus never entirely realized was almost as effective as the vigorous digs that were generally favoured by most of the others), in the greedy scrabbling of Bastion's fingers across his soles as if even with both feet completely at their disposal they were unable to get enough (and the furtive way, when noone seemed to be looking, that Bastion's tongue slid along his arches or slithered between his toes).

Without the incentive there had been in the tournament to refrain from squirming, Aster writhed and wriggled wildly as he laughed as hard as he could. As he strained to respond to the tickling of each of the other seven at once, he felt the settling of some new sense of destiny. He might find his father tomorrow, next week, next month, next year, maybe even never. But even with a father lost, perhaps forever, Aster could claim a family found, a family built (as his armpits, neck, chest, ribs, sides, stomach, navel, thighs, knees legs and feet all attested to the fullest extent) on a foundation as solid and strong as blood, or which at the precise moment felt even a good deal more so, a foundation that, let him wander to the ends of the earth and through the utmost of human experience, could always bring him back to this moment in the flicker of a toe.

The exhaustion from which such realizations sprang was making itself evident. Aster was just able to gasp out the occasional, "Oh, my ----," naming wherever he happened to be feeling the tickling most at the moment, but it was beyond him to make any further verbal interruption. Perspiration, like a glaze on a gourmet entree covered his laughter-pinkened body from head to toe. Aster's hair, which had always before kept its style throughout even the most vigorous of activities and fallen in clean, neat lines without the stiffness of Bastion's or Chazz' rigid coiffure, had gone damp all through and plastered itself to his head in a state of disarray that might have led a spectator to think he'd just run a double marathon. How long he'd been tickled who knew? Not Aster.

The stranger, looking on, saw that Aster had realized what he had been supposed to realize. The day was the success that had been foreseen. There would be further successes with, and further fun for, the hero of destiny. But it was time for the day's tickling to draw to a close; the boys would be quite late enough back.

Zane and Atticus helped Aster out of his restraints and off the table; Jaden and Chazz walked him back to the changing area. It took Aster only a little longer than the others to change, but when he emerged he looked very nearly himself again with even his hair almost back to normal. All the boys looked surprisingly normal, with only their still-bare feet indicating any potentially unusual afternoon activity.

The stranger, apparently feeling some mystic significance in their numbering eight, had them pose for a group photograph, sitting in a line, with TICKLISH DUELISTS written on their sixteen feet. Afterwards, when they rose to go, Jaden asked who was left at Duel Academy to be selected to join

them the following week. The stranger replied that there was a very good chance that there would not be any other student making them nine just at present.

“Then won’t we be coming back here next week?” asked Atticus, sounding disappointed.

“Of course you’ll be back next week. Nobody has guessed my identity yet. And, which is perhaps even more important, I’m thinking now of having Aster tickle the other seven of you at once.” Zane, Ty, Atticus, Bastion, Jaden, Chazz and Syrus all looked at each other. Aster looked at them all, then smiled.