

“Huff...I...huff...can't...huff...believe...huff...I let...huff...you...huff, huff...talk me...huff, huff...into this!” I complained.

“Come on Trim! We haven't even run a block yet!” Delia yelled back, as her lead on me increased by the second.

“D...huff...I've gotta...huff...stop for a...huff... a sec...huff...”

“Trim, if you don't get into at least a half-way decent shape you're going to wind up vamp food!”

Delia Hunter, one of the hottest girls I knew, and all she could think about was phys-ed and kickin' the ass of this week's big bad. Problem was, all I could think about around her was, well, the usual things a red-blooded American boy of sixteen years will think about around girls...“Oooo, ah, I gotta sit for a minute D.”

“Why? What is wrong now? Have you got a side stitch or something?”

“I just gotta sit for...huff...a minute.” I said, thinking to myself about linoleum, cars, Star Wars... no that leads to Leia in a slave outfit and back to the dark side.

“Linoleum, there's nothing sexy about linoleum.” I mumbled aloud.

“What was that Trim?”

“Nothin' D.”

“You said something about sex didn't you.”

“Did you know my Grans knows David Copperfield the magician?” I asked, changing the subject as quickly as possible.

“What?”

I started a very slow jog down the street saying; “Hey, I'm good to go again.”

“Fine, let's get going.”

“Remember, you offered to buy breakfast if I did this...’

“And remember *you* promised I could pick out a healthy meal for you...”

“Healthy I can do, so long as it ain't got tofu, shrooms, onions, asparagus, radish, pretend meat, wheat germ...” I continued to tick off a considerable list of food that didn't like me.

“There goes almost the whole menu!” she sighed. “Well, I'm sure I can come up with something you'll like.”

We ran in silence for a few minutes.

“D?”

“Yes?”

“Is a side-stitch an incredibly sharp pain running up and down one side of your body?”

“Yes it is.”

“Arrrgggh....” was all I could say as I fell against a lamp pole and slid to the ground clutching at my side.

“Trim!”

“Are you just gonna jog there as I die? Call 911!”

“You are going to die.” She said in all seriousness.

“I knew exercise would kill me.”

“But not from a side stitch.”

“What do you know?”

“Come on, get up! The best thing for it is to walk it off”

“Food...I need food...everything going black...cough, cough.”

“Jeez Trim can’t you think about anything else?”

“Just you” I mumbled under my breath so she couldn’t hear.



Exercises in Friendship

Part One: Trim Deals

By Jill Irving and Brad Lord

With Chris Dellario

“Delia! Hey D!” A voice called out as Delia rushed to get to class.

“Hi!” She turned back to face Darius.

“I saw you running with Trim yesterday.” He paused, “I didn’t figure you’d like to run with others.”

“Why not?” She asked.

“Because they’d slow you down,” Dare replied.

“Running a mile or so, or much less in Trim’s case, at a slower pace isn’t going to break my conditioning. I can always run later or longer...” she shrugged her pack onto her shoulder. “Sometimes it’s nice to be a bit more social.”

“Really?” He flashed his thousand mega-watt smile. “You know what they are calling you around school nowadays?”

“This should be enlightening.” Delia’s expression turned patently annoyed. “No, what are they calling me?”

“Deadly Delia!” Dare’s tone dripped with amusement.

Delia thought about it a minute. “Well, at least they know my name now.” She shrugged again. “See you later. I need to get to class.”

She ran into the classroom across the hall just as the bell rang. Dare stood watching her in amazement for a moment.

“Sometimes she baffles me.” He marveled to himself as he strolled to his next class.

“Trim!” Delia called as she sprinted down the hall, maneuvering the obstacle course of students like a champion.

“Hey Deal.” I shoved my bag into my locker.

“How are you feeling?” She asked as she leaned on the locker next to mine. The pose was casual and somehow very sexy.

“I hurt. I feel like my lungs tried to leap up through my throat to strangle my brains and someone used a powered meat-tenderizer on my thighs. Thank *you* very much!” I replied.

She grinned, “Pain is gain!”

“HA!”

“Really though, I warned you to stretch more. I’ll bet you didn’t do the cool-down stretching I suggested. Did you?”

I looked back into my locker to see if I needed anything. “I cooled down,” I responded...although my cool-down consisted of sticking my head in the freezer for a couple minutes and then having some ice cream.

She glared at me for a minute until I could feel the sweat start to trickle down my back. I was beginning to think she might hurt me.

“Are you going to run with me again?”

“Well, I have some plans today. Maybe another time?” I evaded.

“I’m going to hold you to it. Trust me; it’s for your own good.”

“Mom says the same thing about spinach, but...”

Delia laughed and I noticed Christian Oullette, who has the locker next to me, hanging around, nervously waiting for Delia to move. He looked unwilling to ask her to step out of the way. She glanced over, and waved him on as she slid to the side.

“Hey, that reminds me. How’d you like to come to dinner on Friday?” She paused on the other side of me. “Grams is doing this whole traditional New England meal complete with a huge vat of chowder.”

“Free food? I’m there!” I answered.

“Cool. Come over about six.” Delia instructed as she turned and headed to her next class.

As I shut the door of my locker, Christian was staring at me. “Wow!” was all he said.

“What?” I asked.

“You’ve been asked out by Deadly Delia!” He looked like a strong wind could blow him over.

“No, it’s not like...” I stopped to think about it. She had been bugging me about running...spending time with her. Now she invited me to dinner with the family. Maybe she was trying to get close...Delia style. Whoa, time to stop another trip to the dark side. “She has been spending a lot of time with me.”

“It’s not like there are a lot of guys who would go out with her.” Christian added. “But if you could get past the camouflage and the attitude...”

“I’ve got a date with a hot chick.” I felt like whistling on the way to class.

The doorbell rang in Delia’s house. She was in the kitchen helping her Grams with some last minute preparations for dinner. Delia finished mixing the ingredients she put together.

“I think this is right Grams.” She said turning the handle of the saucepan towards her grandmother. “I better get the door.”

Wiping her hands as she walked, she opened the door as the bell rang again. “Glad you could make it T.J.”

T.J. grinned, “I wouldn’t have missed this for the world, Deal.” She walked in the door carrying a duffel bag.

“Supplies?” Delia asked.

“Overnight bag and a few toys, I figured I’d get double the opportunity to torture people if I stayed.” T.J. laughed and tossed the bag at Delia. “Why don’t you show me where I’m staying?”

“Um...well I wasn’t planning on that.” Delia frowned.

T.J. raised her eyebrows, “You worried about...”

“...telling my mother? Yes!” Delia completed the sentence. “She’s been a little out of sorts about the wardrobe change.”

“Ah...I get you. Just let me handle it!” T.J. suggested and started into the kitchen. “So where we gonna do this ‘workout’?”

“The Dojo at Raine’s is the best place, but it might be easier to make it happen in the backyard.” Delia indicates the back door.

“Okay, let’s take a look.” The two stepped out the backdoor to set the stage for the evening’s entertainment.

I stood in front of my bathroom mirror combing my freshly washed hair and contemplating those important adolescent issues.

“Is that a zit?” I asked no one in particular while looking closely at my chin.

“So,” I thought, “What does a guy wear for a date with Deadly Delia?” Well, I guess I left my fatigues in my other lifetime...so I’ll have to go for basic black. It’s more slimming anyway.

I dressed, checked my breath and headed off to Delia’s. I didn’t want to be late on the first date...bad form!

Delia answered the door. “Hey Trim, you’re right on time. Come on in.”

“Thanks!” I walked in to the wonderful smells of fresh seafood; it was enough to make my stomach growl.

Delia laughed. She’s been doing a little more of that lately. “I guess that’s a compliment to Grams. Come on back into kitchen.” I followed her into a large, old-fashioned kitchen with a big farmhouse table set with five place settings.

“Trim, I’d like you to meet my grandmother, Dolores Withers.”

“How do you do young man? Delia says that you have a big appetite. Hopefully we’ll be able to satisfy it.”

I tried very hard not to react to the comment. “Everything smells wonderful.”

“Trim, this is my good friend T.J. from boot camp.” Delia introduced.

I looked over and saw another girl, dressed in blue, who looked a lot like Major Carter from Stargate. “Hi, nice to meet you” I managed to choke out.

“Mom should be here shortly.”

“Grams, everything was wonderful.” Delia beamed at her grandmother. “I’ll take care of the cleanup.”

“No, you have company. I’ll take care of it.” Dolores offered. “You should...”

“Delia will do the dishes.” Amelia stated. “She has company; she should work for the privilege.”

Grams looked like she was about to argue. Delia had turned rather red, but she stood up and grabbed a couple dishes.

“It’s no big. I’ve got it.” As she walked past, she gave her grandmother a kiss on the cheek. “Thanks!”

T.J. rose quickly and grabbed a couple more dishes. “Hey, yeah, we’ll get this cleaned up in no time.” She announced following Delia to the sink.

Amelia rose as well and started to leave the kitchen. T.J. called to her. “Mrs. Hunter, I have a request. I was hoping I could stay over tonight.”

Amelia turned around and sent Delia a less than friendly look.

“Delia told me that such late notice wasn’t fair. You know how it is in military homes. They just called this noontime and said they could get an exterminator in today. Mom and Dad are going to stay with friends, another officer, but I’m not really comfortable with them. I was hoping I could stay here with Deal, if it’s not too much of an inconvenience.”

Amelia’s attention had changed from Delia to T.J. during her monologue. “Well, I don’t suppose it would be too much trouble.”

T.J. smiled, “no worries, I love helping out around the house.”

Amelia nodded and left the room followed by a grinning Dolores.

Delia lifted an eyebrow at T.J., but said nothing.

“...for I was born with a silver tongue...” T.J. sang clearing more dishes off the table.

“So Trim, would you like some iced tea while T.J. and I finish cleaning up?” Delia asked.

“That’d be great.”

“**W**e’ve got a surprise for you outside.” Delia announced as she turned on the dishwasher.

I could barely think from the images that went through my mind. I got up and followed the two of them out the backdoor. There were several padded mats set up across the grass. More images...two hot chicks...hot and sweaty...rolling on the mats... had to think of something else, like linoleum.

“Trim?” Delia said, apparently not for the first time. “You okay?”

“What’s this for?” I finally asked hopefully.

“T.J. and I are going to show you some moves.” Delia volunteered.

Oh my god! My greatest dreams come true....

“I figure you need to know at least basic hand-to-hand combat to help you against...um...the jocks.” She winked at me then. “Why don’t you slip off your shoes while I run in and grab a couple towels? T.J., would you start him on some stretching?”

I just stood there contemplating how to get out of it. They thought I was going to fight them? Get hot and sweaty with them...any day! But fight? I’ve seen D fight. She may not be a Slayer, but all the same, I’d rather not be her punching- or flipping- or kicking-bag. If T.J. was anything at all like D...no way!

T.J. stood between me and the door, with her hands on her hips. She was staring directly at me. “You’re thinking of bolting aren’t you?” She asked.

“Did you know my Grans knows David Copperfield the magician?” I asked, changing the subject as quickly as possible.

“What?” T.J. responded.

“Gotta go...” I tried to take advantage of her lost focus.

“Before you do, you better think about how far and fast you can run. I’m thinking I could take you down pretty quick. I’m also thinking that you’d be better off ‘sparring’ with me,

than ‘fighting’ me to get out of here....but that’s just my opinion.” She glanced back over her shoulder. “On the other hand, I’ve seen Deal take down a guys bigger than her without breaking a sweat...honey, she would kill you.”

“You see, I’ve got this condition....I’m allergic to exercise, work, phys-ed, Mondays, *pain* ...”

“Then you really don’t want to upset her.” She glared at me. Again, she glanced over her shoulder toward the door, and then stepped up beside me. “Look, I’ll make you a deal.”

“What?” I asked suspiciously.

“You give it a real try, make her happy.” She looked me dead in the eye and smiled. “I’ll give you a little bit of the show you were hoping for when you walked out here.”

I goggled at her...there was no other way to describe it. My jaw dropped a mile and I just stood there trying to gulp for air like a fish out of water. “W..w..what?” finally stammered out of my tight throat.

“You give it a try...I’ll kiss her” she paused “in front of you!” Her smile turned to a mischievous smirk.

“You are pure evil. If superheroes were real, you’d be someone’s archenemy.” I told her.

She stepped back as the door slammed open. “You in?” she whispered.

I numbly nodded yes.

“Your shoes are still on” Delia observed as she returned. “Come on, kiddies. Time to get sweaty.”

I gulped and started having trouble breathing.

“We’re going to start with some of the basics: breathing techniques and some easy Tai Chi movements.” She continued. “Follow me and remember to breathe in through the nose and out through the mouth.”

“I already know how to breathe.” I told her.

“It doesn’t seem like it at the moment.” She commented. “Think of it as mok’bara.”

“I am NOT a Klingon.” I stated flatly. “But I’ll give it a try.” I continued as I removed my sneakers.

“These first movements are to help you find your center, both physically and meditatively.” Delia bent her knees and started slowly moving her hands in front of her body. T.J. fell into step...and I tried to follow along.

“**O**kay, you’ve done really well at this part of it, Trim.” Delia praised. “Now we’re going to try to put a few of these movements to use. The object is to be centered and move in such a way that your opponent’s strength and speed are used against them.”

T.J. moved up in front of Delia. “Now watch carefully, Delia is going to attack me and I’m going to use the basic movements we’ve been working on to take her down.” T.J. signaled for Delia to start.

Delia stepped forward and started to grab T.J. who used the first movement they'd shown me to grab Delia. She then pivoted forcing Delia down to the ground.

"Okay, now you try."

I get to pin Delia? I thought before my mind shut off completely.

"I'm going to come at you the same way. Follow my motion. Move in under my arms and then pivot to take me down." T.J. shattered my fantasy...oh well she's hot too.

I followed the motions through and ended up with one of my hands about an inch from T.J.'s breast. She didn't go down; she smacked my hands away and said to start again.

We practiced the same few moves until it started to feel easier and until every muscle in my body was screaming.

"You're killing me."

"Quit your whining." T.J. snapped, "you've almost got this down."

"I need to quit before I die."

"He's right, T.J., it's getting a little late. Let's just do a little cool down to make sure you don't cramp up, Trim." Delia started showing me some more movements.

"No more. I'm done."

"Seriously, if you don't stretch properly afterwards you'll probably hurt a lot more in the morning."

I didn't want to do it, but I did a little stretching as she explained. "Fine"

A few minutes later, T.J. turned to me. "You did well."

"Yeah, if you keep this up, practice and train with me at least once a week, you might not find yourself picked on so often." Delia smiled.

"Maybe...we'll see." I liked the way she was looking at me.

T.J. moved up beside Delia. "Well, you kept your part..." she reached over, grabbed Delia on either side of the face, and laid a smacking kiss on her cheek "...so I guess I better keep mine." Delia glared at T.J. but didn't comment.

"Hey..." I started, but stopped as T.J. shook her head slightly.

She turned back and grabbed Delia more forcefully. She started to plant her lips on Delia's; then she was airborne. T.J. landed a few feet away from where she started.

Delia turned and glared at her as she slowly brushed herself off. T.J. still had a bit of a grin on her face.

Delia laid her hands on her hips. "Did you think I wasn't expecting some kind of double-cross? I could hear you talking when I started out the door. I am not here to feed the prurient fantasies of a teenaged geek. This was about helping a friend." Delia stormed away slamming the door to the house behind her.

"Oops...must have hit pretty close to the mark there kid, to get her all riled up like that." T.J. grinned and followed Delia in.

I contemplated leaving out the back gate, but Dolores had said I could take home some of the extra chowder.

Inside, Delia handed me the chowder and walked me to the front door.

“This wasn’t a date was it?” I asked.

“Did I say it was?” she looked genuinely perplexed.

“I just thought...well...I thought.”

“I’m sorry Trim. There are many reasons that I’m not interested in dating now. My father...” she shook her head “...it’s just too much right now. I’m sorry. I can only be your friend.”

“Sometimes she baffles me.” I thought as I nodded and walked out.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid” I thought on the way home. “I’m so gullible. Women are so evil.” I couldn’t stop thinking about it. “Why the hell did I listen to Christian? Why in the name of the Great Bird of the Galaxy did I hafta fall for Deadly Delia?” I raged at my stupidity.

It was then I realized that I wasn’t holding the container of chowder anymore; it was floating a few inches above my right hand. “Cool!” I said aloud, and it dropped to the ground. “Good thing it’s plastic! I’d hate to waste food this good. Hmmm...I gotta ask Grans about this! Hmmm, yeah! Meatballs would hit the spot right about now!”

I changed direction and headed over to Grans' place figuring she'd be up watching the Friday night reruns of Murder She Wrote or something.

Walking in the front door, I called out, “Grans! Hey Grans! You still up? Where you at?”

"Hello ... Trim? That you?" I heard the crinkle of plastic as Grans got up from her favorite chair in front of the television. Grans had always been what you'd call a "neat-nazi"; all of Grans furniture is covered in clear plastic. Even as my mind reached for the phrase "furniture condoms," I once more annihilated the thought, fearing that mixing the concept of Grans with the concept of a condom would cause the Universe to explode.

"You take them off you shoes and you come in the kitchen. I gotta the new ice cream."

As I entered, I said, "Hey Grans look what I can do!" Flushing with concentration and pride I made the bowl of chowder from Delia's grandmother float an inch above my hand. "Damn! I got it a lot higher the first time!"

"What a you gotta? The soup with a the clams? I no make. Who make a this?"

“Yes Grans, it clam chowder. Delia's Grandmother made it. Never mind that! Look! I can make it float! Float I tell ya!”

Grans eyes narrowed and her lips pressed together into a line, her head was slightly shaking. Even before her hands went to her hips, I recognized the angry-look. "You getta from that woman. That woman I tell you to stay away. You no listen! I tell you, I tell you but you no listen!"

“Granssss...never mind that now.” I whined a little. "Look I can float stuff." The bowl rose a little more under my intense concentration.

"Be...sides...what's...wrong...with...Delia's...grand...mother...ennngghh." I grunted out between my teeth while desperately trying to maintain my concentration.

"Her...chowda...is...great...stuff...grrr...!"

The container flew from my hand leaving me snatching at air, thinking that my concentration had lapsed enough for the container to fall. Then I noticed it was held fast in Grans' hand. The headshake was worse now. "Eamagodthejackass!" Grans said in a rasp of a whisper. I knew that particular gransism meant trouble. "I told a you to stay away from her. I told a you, not because a grandma like to tell all the time 'Do this a do that,' but so a you no get hurt. You want a soup with a clam, I make. 'Brucilo!'" as she spat out the word the container erupted in flames and disappeared, "but you take nothing from that woman. Nothing!"

"Ahhh...damn." I sighed. "Grans, umm...It's gonna be kinda hard for me to stay away ALL the time. D...that is Delia, is my friend. We've got classes together, we hang out together, we've fought side by side against vampires!" sigh..."Hell we've even done homework together...Why do you hate her so much?"

"They gotta the bad blood in the family, there. Very bad." She said, the hand that held the now vaporized container accenting each word. "You stay from that girl and her grandma, if you know what good for you."

"Whadda ya mean `bad blood` Grans? Did someone marry his own sister or somethin'? How bad can it be?"

"I say, 'Bad, very bad.' You understand why I say you no listen?"

"Grans, that's not really an answer! So, NO I don't understand. What did D's grandmom do? Did she steel away an old boyfriend of yours? HUH? Please tell me Grans, D is too good a friend..." I spoke in a low voice laden with an honest plea for help and understanding.

"It's not a just what they do, Trim, but what they are. You eat ... I make a the bread in the morn. Good a night." As Grans left the kitchen, I noticed her face held a look of concern. A few moments later I heard her bedroom door close behind her.

My concern and confusion showed on my face as I saw myself in a mirror on the wall. "I think Grans has lost it. Oh well, hmmm...I wonder if Grans can get me tickets to see David Copperfield the next time he's in Boston?" I commented comically to the air attempting to return to my customary state of mind.

As the proverbial light bulb turned on, I changed direction from the front door to the basement. Creeping down the stairs, I found the door to the basement locked. I smiled as I pulled a set of lock picks from my backpack.

Once on the other side, I went past Grans' second kitchen and started rooting around in the storage area. After a few minutes digging through an old trunk, I found an old photo of two couples. One was Grans and Papa Franco. The woman in the other couple was clearly Delia! "Wait a minute! That can't be. Delia's only sixteen; she couldn't have been alive in the dark ages. This must be Mrs. Withers"

I stuffed the photo into my pack to scan later. I left the basement, locking the door behind me, and snuck out the back.

Delia found T.J. in her bedroom.

“What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking you could use a good kiss.” She shrugged.

“Did you ever think I might like to pick the time and place of my first kiss? And I might like it to be with someone I was interested in?”

“You’re interested in someone?”

“That’s not the point!”

“Maybe it is.” T.J.’s eyebrow lifted.

“No it isn’t!” Delia ended. “You of all people know I have enough to deal with, not to pull this crap with me.”

Silence reigned in the room for a few minutes as they looked meaningfully at each other while T.J. had the grace to look embarrassed. She held out her empty hands toward Delia, who shrugged and shook her head a bit. Finally, Delia sighed and let it go.

“Prurient?” T.J. smirked.

“It’s on the SAT study list.”

T.J. just shook her head. “Sometimes I forget that you are more than a bad-ass.”

Delia cocked her head to the left. “Did you really want to kiss me?”

T.J. scratched her head. “A little, I suppose. Mostly I was going for shock value. And like I said, I think you need a good kiss.”

“And you’re just the one to give it to me?” Delia lifted her eyebrow.

T.J.’s grin was insolent. “So I’ve been told.”

“By a man or woman?”

“Both!” She winked and headed into the bathroom.

The following morning, T.J. slept in as Delia ran. When she got to Dare’s house, he raced outside to join her.

“Hey Delia!”

“Morning!” She responded slowing down to pace him.

“Hope you don’t mind if I join you. I’ve been thinking about starting and thought you could help motivate me.”

“I don’t mind. Let me know if I’m going too fast.”

Dare smiled “I’m not worried about that.”

They ran in silence for a while so that Dare could conserve his breath. As they ran past Trim’s house, he was nowhere to be seen. Delia glanced up at the window she thought was his, but the whole house was dark. She contemplated knocking, and then turned away as she realized he could be hurting from the night before.

I was purposely late to school on Monday. Hoping I'd manage to miss the evil and deadly woman known as Delia Hunter, but I'd forgotten about Christian.

"Hey Trim," he asked, "How was the big date with Deadly Delia?"

I concentrated for a moment, noticing his hand on the edge of his locker. Suddenly the locker's door slammed shut on his fingers.

"OW!" He yelled shaking his hand. "How'd that happen?"

"You should go to the nurse and get that looked at. Ice, ice would be good." I told him as I headed down the hall with a smirk. "I'll talk to you later." Much later.