

Tunk and Toedork
by Kurrdragon

for Doran Eirok

SLAM!

Your locker insultingly shut on its own-- no, it was slammed by the big black forepaw of Tunk, the feared monitor lizard. He was in your face, tongue flicking the air to taste your rising dread. Gosh, the school hall was so jammed full between classes, and inside your mind you think that even with all these witnesses around Tunk the big bully monitor could likely beat you up into hamburger and no one would dare rat on him! And now... here this senior was, his head at the ceiling, staring you down!

—"H-Hey T... T-T-T—"

—"Shut. It. Unless you can say my name. And I dunno yours, so I'm calling you 'Toedork' this year." Oh, the wave of shame. Tunk the bully christened you in front of thirty students skittering by, they didn't dare butt in, but the new insult name was going to be torture this year.

Why did he pick you? Why did he pick that name? Would you be able to notify your next of kin? Oh heavens now he was leaning in! His mouth opened to reveal surely millions of sharp teeth and his claws gouged the lockers as he got so close, this is the end...!

—"You've been staring at me. You think I don't see? You think you got something to say to me? Looks like it's your lucky day," the rocks in his voicebox surely gargled and sparked. "Today, the football field. The shed where they keep all the lawn mowers and training gear. Be there. Or else," his tongue hissed and his fist closed. Gulp.

He swung around, his hall-filling body and granite shoulders and titanic legs and space-owning paws all turned, and off he went, the massive broad pale gray paws going boom boom down the hall. The other students collectively kept one foot of distance away from him, like fish keeping clear of a single shark. Why did he have to pick you? Did you even stare? He suddenly flicked his head back and caught you staring at him and his paws! No! He *knows!* You proved him right!

And it happened right before lunch too. On top of an upcoming test, you lost your appetite, and you were caught in an uncomfortable cold sweat in the air conditioning of classes and study hall. And the final bell rang at 3:30. Time for your execution. Tunk (even his name sounded bully-appropriate) would find you if you didn't go. So you had to. He would find you. He always does. The grassy stretch out to the ball fields and the gear shed seemed both infinite and far too short. The sky was a lovely blue. What a lovely day for your life to end at the scaly fists of this guy...

You turn the corners around the shed, not seeing him, hope rising that he forgot or he was just bluffing, but no, turning another corner of the shed you see a pale gray crossed paw and leg sticking out. The leg led up to that massive body, to the copper eye glaring out from the mountainside of black granite that was Tunk.

—"H-how... can.. I s-s-serve—"

—"Can it Toedork. Come here. Closer," his voice lifted as you flinched in his shadow. "Closer," he teased with a playful, menacing grit in his teeth. You microstep closer. It had been a good, if brief life. The spiked scaled armored cast iron fist of his closed, the knuckles almost growing spikes. Ah, behold the means of your destruction. Your eyes close, and you make peace with existence. Here it comes.

The punch to your fac- punch? Did he punch, are you dead? You certainly felt scales brush your shivering cheek, did he miss? From less than a foot away? Brush, there they go again, down your other cheek.

"Hey. Toedork. Toedork." You must be hearing his voice from outside your expired body, as he is calling from below you.

Brush, go a few monitor fingers on your brow. "Open your eyes—okay Toedork—what's your actual name? Open—" and you open your eyes, and there he is mostly crouched before you. You manage to squeak your name in immense surprise that you still have life, and that the high school bully is... conversing with you. "Well that's a neat name but I think I want to call you Toedork still," he smiles. It is almost as big a surprise how his face morphed from granite death to a friendly smile, and he stands back to full height.

"H-....hello." He is *greeting* you. Is this how he toys with his prey? Wasn't he here to pulp y—"Listen Toedork, I'm not here to pulp you, and I actually don't do that to anybody. People see big me and always think I'm the school bully." Is he wincing? "I... do bully, but only 'cuz I've been bullied, and it hurts, and I hate it. And I used it to get my way, and I'm sorry."

He's sorry??

You raise your hand to ask a question. "Does this mean I get to live?" Immediately he laughs bending over, "Dude okay, okay, honestly I'm sorry. You were really scared eh? I guess I sorta do bully still, but I don't really want to hurt you. But I have seen you staring." Immediately he brings the granite back. He melts it back into decency. "I see you stare at me, or part of me, my paws it seems... maybe you're like me. I've been staring at you, and your paws too. You're little and cute, and I like you."

The world stopped. Even the birds stopped singing. The school bully is actually a nice guy, and he likes you. AND IN THE SAME WAY YOU LIKE HIM.

Today isn't real.

Now your heart is pounding in your neck, the blood rushing in your ears as he says words but you can't believe it...

"Listen, it's... difficult. I just look.... like a bully. I'm tall and look older than I am, but... I find lots of people... girls and boys.... cute. I can't describe it better than that. So this is my offer, Toedork." The insult seems to send a different rush to you that's not embarrassment. "You're cute when you're nervous, and I want to be with you, and I hope you want to be with me too. But I gotta keep up the bully image. So... how about if I bully you in school, but gently? No one will expect any different from me. And I'll protect you from any real bullies that come across. I don't want you to hurt. I know how that feels."

Tunk's dark face, holding his copper hazel eyes, suddenly looked so alive and gentle. The leather of his skin now revealed his suppleness. His eyes have depth, as though they were asking you for your answer. A stroke of dry smooth leather caresses on your little bitty footpaw, and you glance down—the giant gray dinosaur paw of his caresses the top of yours surprisingly softly. "You like that. We like that, we both know it," Tunk almost chuckles.

"Are you... being serious?" You have to ask, it just... can't be true can it?

"Look, you pick. You don't have to be with me, and if you say no, I'll leave you alone. I just don't want to be alone. I'm sorry I had to make a show to get your attention-" his muzzle turns away to stare with some guilt off to a side "-but I don't really know how to just ask. But I do like you. Whaddaya say?"

His voice had no grit. His face was not stone. Even his tall body seemed to bend in contrapposto, the word for the loose relaxed side-lean stance you learned in art history class. And he is kinda hot, strong body and indeed thick, sinuous, flexy countershaded paws oh gosh give him a whirl just say yes—and you do.

Your world is enveloped in leather jacket, white tshirt, and the careful ripples of lizard muscles all around as Tunk hugs you like a big, no a huge brother.

All the fear and cold sweats evaporate away, and you find your little arms don't quite meet around his torso but that is okay. And your little bitty footpaw sneaks a feel, caressing the same way on top of his. "One ask though, I got," you dare to say.

"When we're alone, I don't wanna be bullied. Call me Toe...dear. Toedear please."

His grip carefully tightens. "Gotcha Toedear," his soft laugh is muffled through his impressive pecs and protective gym biceps.

The school year goes well, and status seems to come to you. Tunk bullies the bullies at school, and he hefts them at the shoulders and carries your enemies off, one in each arm to give them sink swirlies-- he just doesn't have the hate to plunk them in the toilet, even if they deserve it. In the halls, sometimes you two play the parts out, and he presses his big, beautiful, tender paw on your chest as he pretends to call you your favorite nickname, and he mashes you underfoot. His warm paw clutches you and as the bell rings and the students clear, you both grin and go to your classes. And after school, you go for pizza and sodas, and talk and study and cuddle, little paws and giant paws tingling with affection as they rub under the pizza place table.

Tunk likes your smarts-- he is a very average student and feels self conscious not knowing the answers to your simpler questions, but his grades gradually rise to above average. Tunk credits you, you make him feel like more than just a hulk in the crowd. Maybe you help, but he's doing the work, and he makes you proud. Your affection flowing through your feet opens his heart and tongue, so that he talks with you about how much he likes you, and eventually loves you too. It's wonderful to find tenderness in someone who's given and taken so many beatings, and that tenderness leaks out from him in classes.

By next spring, the granite has gone. The fish allow themselves to brush up against the shark. Tunk's pretty voice still has gravel, but you like to hear him go "Hello" to other kids around him. He's making friends, but he still commands respect with his big body, and no one plays him for a fool. It seems like you both help each other out, but there's the one little uncomfortable fact. He's a senior, and you.... are a junior. And Tunk's parents are immediately putting him in community college hours away for remedial classes this summer, and next year.

"I'll be gone, Toedear," he calls you your mutually preferred name, as you both down slushies on a late spring sunset. "I'm sorry. You know I need it, and my folks want me to get a head start 'cuz... you know. My grades. I'm hoping to get into HVAC, they say it's easy money, but I have to apprentice."

You move in to squeeze him. His big body curls and bows down, becoming equal with you, the monitor lizard wrapping and carrying you up. A tear comes from his copper eye, and in a flash of embarrassment he wipes it and then yours with the same hand. He touched his tear to yours on your face, what an unintentional romantic.

—"I love you." He tells you. "I'm going to miss you."

—"I love you too, I don't want you to go."

But he does go. And life goes on. And things change and you both didn't want to admit you drifted apart, but the memories of a gentle bully, and a very special first time love, stayed with you years after you graduated. What a lovely memory Tunk was, he came back to your mind as you made the appointment for the technician to check why your heat pump is suspiciously buzzing and smoking but not cooling. And right in the middle of summer too.

The supposed joys of owning your first home.

Chirp-chirp goes the cell phone ring and the automated call from the contractor, letting you know that your air conditioner technician has arrived and needs to be let in please. And you can only wonder how much this is going to cost you, and a familiar uncomfortable cold sweat creeps up your body.

Ding-ding, there is the doorbell, and you pull the front door wide. A wall of uniformed granite needs to bend down to clear under the door frame. And a gravelly greeting stops short as your technician catches a glimpse of your face.

You read four letters on the name tag upon this tech's uniform polo.

"...Hey, Toedork. Nah. Toedear." And a big light gray paw, and a big smile, pushes you gently back in to your home.