

INTO THE MAELSTROM

First in the Series of
PLANETARY TALES

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THE GAME BEGINS

(Chapter 2)

Blame it on boredom, pure and simple. As Arley climbed aboard the enormous interplanetary transport ship docked on Europa, his home base in the Jupiter system, he dreaded the tedious monotony of six weeks on this slow boat to the Sun. Not seeing another living being, he passed through security, was scanned and processed by machines and directed through what seemed like miles of hallways to his private quarters. His heart sank. With every step he felt lonelier and sadder. All was silent, gray and deserted.

Arley had just left his family, all two hundred and fifty of them, who lived and worked together in the family compound. Although he had been looking forward to breaking out on his own for a long time, this sudden solitude was absolutely too much. Already he missed the arguments, the jealousies, the games and the laughter. He was absolutely certain that he would be destroyed by his nemesis, boredom. He bemoaned his lowly rank in the scientific community that condemned him to this ancient means of travel, while his superiors enjoyed much greater privileges. *No inter-dimensional time travel for me! There are no luxury facilities, pleasurable spas, fully equipped exercise rooms, opulent restaurants or continuous entertainment on this decrepit old transport. It was built for heavy-duty shipment of materials, not tourists like me.*

Arley hurried past the sleeping pods, trying not to look at the rows and rows of human passengers already sealed in suspended animation. Then he hesitated, having second thoughts. *Maybe I should hibernate.* He glanced nervously at the unconscious bodies behind the glass. *No,* he shook his head. *Definitely, not! Life is too short to waste six weeks of it asleep. That's too much like total annihilation.* Arley rushed on down the endless halls, feeling his usual high spirits sink ever lower.

Relieved to find his tiny cabin at last, Arley glanced around its bare interior. He jabbed idly at the control buttons on the wall to make sure his sleeping shelf slid out and the sink and toilet appeared on command. The bare necessities seemed to be working. Stuffing his few belongings into the minuscule compartment, the Jupiterian scientist decided to check the passenger list on the intercom/computer. *I hope there are **some** other living beings on this ship,* he said to himself as he touched the icon. Scanning down the list, his black eyes lit up. *Glasdon!* He exclaimed, *There's a familiar name. My old associate, Glasdon, is on this ship. He could be great company on this long trip.* Arley touched the

screen again to find the list of passengers already checked into hibernation. *Well, he's still awake as far as I can see, but there's no time to waste. He's just the type to hibernate. I'd got to stop him!*

Slamming out of the cabin door, Arley raced down the tunnel at top speed. *Hurry*, he urged himself. In his haste, he lifted off the floor and hit the ceiling. His thick, black curls protected his head somewhat, but his ear got smashed. *Ouch! That hurts!* Rubbing his ear, he chuckled a bit at himself. *I forgot about the transport's lighter gravity. Better take it easy.* Arley galloped back toward the sleeping pods.

Glasdon of Saturn was just bending his massive head to step into the hibernation pod when he heard his name called.

"Glasdon, wait!" Arley shouted as he scampered toward the burley scientist. "Thank God I found you in time!"

The big man recognized that voice only too well. *Not him again!* He sighed to himself.

"Surely you can't mean to hibernate for six weeks!" Arley shouted.

"Of course," was Glasdon's blunt reply. "You should do the same,"

"You can't abandon me this way!" Arley implored as he panted to a stop next to the big scientist.

Glasdon snorted in disgust. "You're dramatizing as usual. You know very well that hibernation is the only practical means of traveling on this old transport."

"No, hear me out," Arley insisted. His mind flashed from one idea to the next. *Somehow I must come up with a rational plan that will appeal to Glasdon's practical mind, and do it quickly.* Ad lib, he began to chatter, "We have serious work to do. The solar system is in crisis. We can't waste this opportunity for creative thought. We need to arrive on the Sun with a workable emergency plan ready to present to the Planetary Council."

Glasdon wasn't convinced. "What could two individuals do about a problem this monumental?" the Saturnian scoffed. "We're just low-level social scientists. No one will listen to us, even if we do come up with a good reconstruction plan." He turned back toward the hibernation pod. "It's just another of your crazy schemes."

"Wait! Listen!" With both hands, Arley grabbed Glasdon's muscular shoulder, trying in vain to turn the big man around. Only about half Glasdon's size, Arley knew he could not stop this stubborn scientist physically; so he kept up the verbal barrage, "It would be great for our careers. Besides, we owe it to the Planetary Council to do our jobs to the best of our ability. We must! It's our

responsibility!” Finally, with this last word, Arley had Glasdon’s full attention. He took his foot out of the hibernation pod and turned toward Arley.

“We could challenge each other to an intellectual duel,” Arley enthused, really beginning to warm up to his new idea. His black eyes shone and his teeth gleamed in a wide smile. “We could make it a contest, or better yet, a game. It could be fun!” He saw Glasdon roll his beady eyes in disgust, not at all impressed by the idea of fun. Realizing his mistake, Arley quickly refocused. He knew, from experience, that only practical projects would appeal to his unadventurous associate. “No, of course, this is serious. I know! We could imagine that we have unlimited power and resources. We could create a model for the perfect planetary society.”

Glasdon frowned, hating to admit that his resistance was weakening. “Well, maybe,” he said gruffly. “If you can find others to join us,” his voice trailed off.

“Great! Yes! I know there are at least five other scientists still awake on this vessel,” Arley lied glibly. “I’ll go find them. Just stay there. I’ll be right back.” The irrepressible little man raced off down the hall, comically hitting his head on the ceiling again. Embarrassed, he grinned back at Glasdon, but the big man wasn’t watching.

With closed eyes, Glasdon was leaning against the wall, already deep in thought. “Hmmm, the perfect society . . .,” Glasdon mumbled to himself. “This could be interesting.”

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Forty passengers were already too deep into hibernation to be reached, but Arley did manage to find two other scientists to participate in his project. Xander, from Uranus, was one. Xander said he would be glad for feed-back on his latest research paper which he was polishing up for publication. Tall and bony, wild-haired and intense, with his head bobbing on a stringy neck, deep-set golden eyes peering out from under shaggy eyebrows and a body covered with feathery gray hair, he looked like a large buzzard contemplating lunch. Everything about the older scientist was bird-like, except for his brain, as Arley was about to discover. Xander was an eccentric, both brilliant and kindly, if such an unlikely combination of characteristics could exist within one skin.

The only other scientist that Arley could find was Lissa. According to the passenger list, she had boarded the transport on Saturn and was heading for the Sun. She hadn’t hibernated yet. That was all Arley needed to know. He sprinted to her cabin, careful to protect his head as he zoomed along. After beating on her cabin door, he stepped back, breathing hard, and waited. It seemed to take forever for the door to open the tiniest crack. “I’m Arley of Jupiter,” he announced. “Are you Lissa of Saturn?” No

reply. He noticed a small gleam of one eye behind the crack, but that was all. It was difficult to talk to a silent stranger behind a blank door, but he gave it his best shot. Hoping that she was listening, he waved his hands and enthused, “On this trip to the Sun, we’re forming a think tank of brilliant scientists to design the perfect society. I’m inviting you to join this select group. Your expertise and experience,” (which, of course, Arley knew nothing about), would make an invaluable addition to this important project.” Arley sputtered to a stop and waited. He tried to endure the scrutiny of that silent eye through an interminable silence. Never good at waiting, his bravado quickly evaporated. *All is lost*, he moaned to himself as his head and shoulders drooped. *Glasdon will hibernate and I’ll lose my mind with boredom!*”

Then, to his amazement, he heard a soft reply from behind the door, “All right, I’ll participate in your project.”

“Really? Wow! Great!” Arley gushed, tripping over his own feet as he backed away, “We’re meeting in the conference room on the third deck.” He wasn’t sure, but he thought he heard her say, “Fine,” as the door clicked shut. “See you there soon,” he yelled at the closed door.

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Arley got his first look at the new recruit as Lissa entered the conference room. Watching her walk toward him, he felt a sudden tightness in his chest. His hand flew to his heart as he inhaled sharply. She swept the three men’s faces with one quick, wide-eyed glance, and then kept her eyes down. Lissa wasn’t beautiful, but there was something about her that Arley found very appealing. She was small and compact. Her long, dark lashes fanned out over thin, flushed cheeks. She had a delicate, slightly up-turned nose and a full-lipped mouth in a heart-shaped face. Her almost bald head, covered only with a short, curly fuzz of brown hair, looked as if it had been recently shaved. Any feminine curves that she might have were concealed by baggy, shapeless clothes. To Arley, she looked like a frightened child caught doing something bad. Protective instincts, which he’d never felt before, rushed into his heart. He wanted to take her into his arms and comfort her. Dazed and speechless, Arley stared at Lissa.

The other two scientists rose to greet Lissa. Belatedly, Arley scrambled to his feet. Xander made the introductions, “This is Glasdon of Saturn. I’m Xander of Uranus, and, of course, you’ve already met Arley of Jupiter.” At the mention of each man’s name, Lissa’s intense, gray eyes flashed up to focus on their faces and then dropped down again. Her full lips stretched into a stiff, artificial smile, but she offered no information about her background or why she was willing to join the group.

Xander gestured toward the empty chair. “Have a seat, Lissa. We’re so glad you agreed to stay awake and work with the rest of us.” Lissa said nothing. She kept her eyes firmly down as the four found places in the circle of lounge chairs. Arley remained on his feet. For some unknown reason, he suddenly felt strong and powerful. Stretching up to his full, five feet, four inches height, Arley opened his arms and announced dramatically, “Let the game begin!”

Immediately, Glasdon objected, “I see no reason to call it a game. I thought this was going to be a serious, scientific project.” Swelling up like a toad, he stated, “I am from Saturn, the educational center of the solar system, and I expect order and discipline.”

Undaunted, Arley ignored him. “Let the game begin!” he repeated. “Every project needs a name, and I have thought of a good one. Are you ready for this?” He glanced around the small circle of scientists. “We’ll call it the Aurora Game. “Aurora” suggests dawn, or new beginnings, and “Game” indicates competitive challenges.” Glasdon snorted in disgust. “O.K.,” Arley raised both palms in conciliation, “To appease Glasdon I’ll agree to exacting operating procedures.” He put his hands behind his back and began to pace back and forth. “First, each participant will have an opportunity to expound his/her ideas without interruption, and then, open deliberation and criticism will follow until complete agreement is reached. Each person’s contribution of an accepted idea would receive one point. Shared ideas share points. At the end of the Aurora Game, the scientist with the most points wins.” Arley looked at Glasdon. “There, does that satisfy you?”

Glasdon sniffed and looked away. He was remembering his work with Arley on other scientific projects. Outwardly, the little man might be all fluff and fury, but underneath the drama, he knew Arley had a good mind. In the end, they had always complemented each other well, Arley, with his creativity, and he, with his thoroughness. “I suppose that will do,” Glasdon agreed reluctantly.

All this talk of rules and regulations was too much for Arley. He couldn’t resist adding, “O.K., if this is really a game, there should be a prize for the winner that is worthy of all this effort.” He glanced around at the three scientists. “Do you have any recommendations?”

The ever-practical Glasdon spoke up, “I think the prize should be an all-expense paid ticket home on a luxury star liner.”

“O.K., how about you, Xander?” asked Arley.

“Well . . . ,” Xander pulled his ear in thought. “I wouldn’t mind winning some money for my research.”

“I know the perfect prize,” Arley announced. Staring directly at Lissa with a wicked gleam in his eyes, he quipped, “The winner gets to kiss Lissa!”

The men laughed. Lissa dropped her eyes in confusion. Her whole face flushed a bright pink.

“Behave yourself, Arley,” kind-hearted Xander reprimanded. He pointed his beaked nose toward Lissa and asked, “What prize would you like, my dear?”

Arley couldn’t resist answering for her. “She gets to kiss me!” he joked.

At this, Lissa jumped up with a desperate look on her face, took a shaky, sobbing breath and then raced out of the room. Glasdon and Xander glanced at each other with amazement while Arley buried his face in his hands, groaning, “Oh, no! She just got here and now she’ll probably quit the Aurora Game!”

“Good riddance!” Glasdon proclaimed. “We cannot carry out serious scientific inquiry with an emotionally unstable female.”

Arley pulled at his hair and berated himself, “I’ve ruined everything before we’ve even started.”

“Now, now,” Xander interjected. “She just seems shy. She might still join us.”

“Really? Do you think so?” Arley straightened up with a gleam of hope in his black eyes. “I know. I’ll go after her and apologize.”

“And what would you say to her?”

“Well, I’m not sure what I’d say.” Arley admitted as he hung his head again.

Xander reached out to stay Arley with a hand on his arm. “No, you stay here.” I’ll take care of it,” he stated as he rose to his impressive nine foot height.

Arley watched in amazement as Xander stood up like a mechanical toy unwinding. First his head flew back; and then his long arms stretched out as if to take wing. Finally, he lurched to his feet, tottering for a few moments before he gained his balance. “You two work out the details of the Aurora Game while I talk to her.” Saying this, Xander turned and bobbed down the hall after Lissa.