

GALAXY GAMES

The Amorphous Assassin

SAMPLE CHAPTERS

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BEIJING, CHINA:

A formation of tigersharks burst through the nighttime haze over the Chinese capital. Three streaks of black and orange buzzed past skyscrapers, swept through Tiananmen Square, and rippled the waters of the Zhongnanhai lakes. Before Tyler met M'Frozza, such an event would have whipped up a civilization-shaking, newscaster-screaming, city-burning panic. Now people just watched, pointed, and shared their videos online.

The three tigersharks dove over the rim of an empty Beijing National Stadium, and slid to a stop under the bright lights of the running track. Twin engines spun down on each shark's front spoiler like pairs of hypnotic hammerhead eyes. Pops and hisses sounded like ten thousand soda cans as each shark's

door unsealed and dropped open like a set of jaws.

One at a time, thirty-six of Earth's greatest young athletes stepped out—plus one completely ordinary Japanese-American boy from Platte Bluff, Nevada.

Tyler Sato squared his shoulders and raised his chin into the brave front he'd been holding for two-and-a-half years, ever since that crazy week when he'd turned eleven, met an alien squid-girl, and won Earth its first-ever slot in the Galaxy Games Tournament. Billions of fans thought Tyler was the greatest kid athlete in human history, and who was he to tell Earth's entire population that they've got it all wrong?

As Tyler gazed up at the Olympic stadium's steel-banded rim and thought more about what an elite sports hero he wasn't, a teammate accidentally bumped him from behind. As Tyler tumbled to the turf, his brain registered dark skin, frizzy brown hair, and red-rimmed eyes.

It could have only been Weez.

The Brazilian soccer star stooped to help Tyler back to his feet. "Oh, Captain! I'm so sorry. I should watch where I'm going, but I was just thinking about . . . well, you know."

"Your brother?" Tyler asked, as if Weez ever thought about anyone or anything else.

Weez fielded a soccer ball that some practical joker

had aimed at his head. The ball dropped from his forehead to his chest, to his knee, to his foot, and stayed there as Weez spun around on his other foot. He fired the ball back the way it had come, all while keeping the same moony-moody expression on his face. “Gustavo would have loved this stadium,” he told Tyler. “The Bird’s Nest. You know, there was a nest in outside Gustavo’s bedroom window. We watched it every day in the spring and summer before—”

Weez tilted his head toward the heavens.

Tyler took off his baseball cap and looked upward with Weez through a respectful moment of silence. “Before your brother was abducted by aliens?”

Weez let out a long breath. “Yeah. And probably for some crazy game show, too.”

Tyler shook his head. After M’Frozza and her Mrendarian crew made their official First Contact visit to Earth, another alien race, the Ossmendians, confessed to popping by over the centuries to film a reality show called *Those Wacky Humans*. In classic episodes, ancient peoples had been tricked into building Stonehenge, domesticating cats, or using fossilized dinosaurs as a fuel source, all for the entertainment of an alien audience.

But even Stonifer, the Ossmendians’ obnoxious granite slab of a Galaxy Games Captain, had sworn on

a stack of bedrock that no humans had ever been stolen away into space. “Have you ever tried to sneak a human into your luggage?” Stonifer had asked. “They wriggle like maniacs, and trust me, you’d never get them past the customs inspectors.”

“Stonifer’s a jerk, but he’s got a strong sense of honor—” Tyler started, but Weez cut him off.

“You and Stonifer have that whole captain-to-captain thing going on, but I don’t trust the guy as far as I could throw ten tons of living rock. Which isn’t very far, in case you were wondering.”

“So you blame the Ossmendians for taking your brother?”

Weez sighed up at the sky. “No. Their ships don’t match the one I saw that night. It’s got to be the grays.” Weez wandered off, still looking up, and bumping into other players along his meandering path. “Sorry. Sorry, dude. Oops. Didn’t see you there.”

“He’s like an apology robot programmed for maximum clumsy,” said Tomoko, appearing suddenly at Tyler’s side. That had been awkward enough back when they were eleven and she was just a tall Japanese girl with a few masterful judo moves. But since then, Tomoko had sprouted skyward and picked up belts and honors in a half-dozen additional disciplines, while Tyler had very clearly done neither.

Tyler pulled himself onto a low wall at the outside edge of the track, to create some distance from Tomoko as much as to put them eye to eye. “I feel bad for Weez,” he told her. “He lost his brother. Even if aliens didn’t take him, that’s still got to be tough.”

Tomoko rolled her eyes. “Hunter-Elf Zeita lost her brother, too. The dragons got him! The difference is, she didn’t get all crazy about it.”

“No, the difference is that she’s an anime character.”

Tomoko glared. “So?”

A cloud of steam poured from Tomoko’s ears like she was an angry Mrendarian. It had to be Tyler’s imagination, but when he rubbed his eyes, the light gray wisps remained clearly visible beyond her violet-stained pigtails against the empty seats on the other side of the stadium bowl.

Tomoko flicked a finger playfully on his forehead, almost knocking him from his perch. “*Tyler-san no baka!* You don’t have to look at me like I’m crazy. Hunter-Elf Zeita is a positive role model whose adventures provide valuable lessons applicable to all aspects of life. It says so on her website.”

“She’s Tinker Bell with a longbow,” Tyler countered.

“Slander!” Tomoko plucked an elf-shaped keychain

from her belt loop and covered its tiny pointed ears. “Don’t listen to Captain Sato-san. He doesn’t know you like I do. He hasn’t even finished the third season!”

Tomoko moved away, and Tyler could see that the steam hadn’t been coming from her head, but from a tangle of pipes that covered an industrial-ugly pyramid of metal out in the middle of the grass playing field.

Tyler had seen a pyramid like that once on a video screen in Geneva, during a meeting of UNOOSA, the United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs. The same meeting where Tyler fell asleep during a presentation, and *#NappingTyler* was trending before he’d even woken up. A picture of Tyler’s head, face-down on a desk in a puddle of drool, had been the most-Google image of the year.

For some reason, Tyler had never been invited back to another UNOOSA meeting.

To keep from ruining anyone’s surprise, Tyler kept quiet about the pyramid as the other players hung out, goofed off, kicked soccer balls, tossed Frisbees, and did all the other things they always did while waiting for Coach Graham to show up.

On the running track, a pale girl with prominent buck teeth pushed a pair of amber goggles into her blond bangs and struck a pose for a section of imaginary spectators. “All hail Maja Fredriksson,

Viking of the Slopes! And the crowd *goes wild!*”

Maja’s exclamation in Norwegian echoed back and forth across the empty stadium, and was rendered into overlapping English by the language implant inside Tyler’s skull. “*Goes wild! Goes wild! Goes wild!*”

For all her gale-force bluster, Maja was a toothpick-thin wisp who barely filled out a down parka. And yet, she’d assembled a small gang of fellow players who trailed her like a litter of puppies: a Russian swimmer named Valya; a Kuwaiti golf prodigy named Bader; and Indian parkour traceur named Hari; a Greek sprinter named Althea; and an Argentine acrobat who liked to be called “The Amazing Waldo.”

On a publicity tour through Scandinavia, the media had dubbed them “Maja’s Mob” and the name had stuck, mostly because Maja insisted on using it so often.

The Mob followed Maja toward a knot of players. “Hey, Maja fans! Let’s give it up for our good buddy Conor O’Roarke, a master of rugby and Gaelic football—not one, but two completely useless sports!”

Valya and Althea cheered, Hari and Bader high-fived, and the Amazing Waldo hooted like a barn owl.

Conor looked up from his warm-up stretches. “Aye. Too bad you’ve only got the one useless sport. Plank-standing, is it?”

“Snowboarding,” Maja sniffed.

“Give it any fancy name you want. At the end of the day, you’re still just standing on a plank.”

Maja narrowed her eyes. “At the end of the day, I’d rather be standing on a plank at the center of everyone’s attention than being buried under a scrum of sweaty rugby dudes.”

Conor clenched his fists and simmered as Maja’s Mob danced around him. “Burned!” Hari shouted. “Owned,” Bader added. Valya and Althea sang a taunting song while the Amazing Waldo just kept shouting, “Bam!” and throwing out rude hand gestures.

Tyler wanted to step in, but found a firm hand on his shoulder. He looked up at Felix, a boy who was big enough to be a sumo wrestler if he’d been born in Japan. But since he was born in Germany, Felix goal-tended soccer instead. “She’s baiting you, Tyler. You know how Maja hates authority figures.”

“I’m no authority figure,” Tyler scoffed.

“You’re our captain. Coach isn’t here yet, so you’re it. Maja wants to draw you into a fight, but it’s not worth it. Conor can take care of himself.”

Tyler nodded. Felix made a lot of sense. And sure enough, after Conor stomped his feet and snarled to disperse the Mob, Maja moved on to her next target.

Maja stuck out her imaginary microphone. “And here’s my good buddy, Weez. How’s it going, Weez?”

Weez blinked back at her. “Huh? Has practice started?”

“What’s wrong, Weez?” Maja sneered. “Did aliens abduct your attention span?”

“No. Just my brother.”

Tyler looked at Felix.

“Not worth it,” said Felix.

“But Weez is our friend,” said Tyler.

“Our friend who doesn’t even know when he’s been insulted. Five minutes from now, he’ll have forgotten that conversation even took place.”

Tyler sighed. Felix was right again.

Maja and her Mob moved down the track, trapping Ling-Wa before she could move away. “Attention, Beijing!” Maja shouted to the empty stands. “Put your hands together for Miss Bei Ling-Wa, your teeny, tiny, little hometown hero!”

The Chinese gymnast lifted herself onto her tiptoes and scowled into Maja’s smirking face. “I’m not from Beijing, and I’m only a little shorter than you.”

“Ouch! That stings!” Maja clutched a hand to her chest. “Yeah, I’m small, but the fans love me anyway. Every time I shred down a mountain, I can feel the crowd giving me a swift kick of energy from behind.”

“And I would also like to give you a swift kick in the behind,” said Ling-Wa.

Tyler’s hands twitched. He turned to Felix, but the goal-tending giant was no longer by his side. Where had he gone?

Maja wore a sad face, but the corners of her mouth smirked upward. The members of her Mob leaned forward in anticipation, and other players had gathered around as well. “I feel bad for you, Ling-Ling,” said Maja. “I’ve always had a legion of fans, while you grew up performing for brick walls in a gymnastics factory. But then I guess some people just aren’t worthy of love and admiration.”

Ling-Wa rocked back onto her heels and huffed out all the air from her lungs. She looked even smaller and younger than before, and Tyler’s language implant had trouble making out her half-swallowed Mandarin. “I guess not.”

If Maja had thrown a punch at Ling-Wa, Tyler could have had her cut from the team. But instead of fists, Maja only used her words. Sharpened words, dipped in poison and delivered to Ling-Wa’s weakest spot. And Tyler could only watch, helplessly.

Ling-Wa was an Olympic-level athlete, while Tyler should have been warming a bench on his hometown’s soccer team. If a Chinese gymnastics star didn’t feel

worthy, who was Tyler to tell her otherwise?

Thank god for Felix. He had gathered up Tomoko, Weez, and El Gatito to stand with Ling-Wa and prop her up from behind. Maja might have had her own Mob, but Ling-Wa had something even better: the Challengers.

Only six humans in history had ever taken on an alien team in a Galaxy Games match with interplanetary stakes. One was Tyler. The other five were the players who had helped Tyler take down Stonifer and the Ossmendians in a game that ranged from the Far Side of the Moon to a driveway in Platte Bluff, Nevada.

The Challengers and the Mob faced off in two lines, surrounded by the rest of Team Earth's players. "Raise your hand if you've battled giant stone monsters on the Moon," said Felix. He raised a hand, along with Tomoko, El Gatito, Ling-Wa, and Weez.

Ling-Wa's expression brightened. "Too bad you weren't there, Maja. Your legion of fans would have loved seeing the Ossmendians kick your butt!"

Maja snarled and gnashed her rather large front teeth.

"I've got one," called Colin, from the outside circle of players. A vengeful grin spread across his face. "Raise your hand if you wear a retainer at night in a

vain attempt to move your big buck teeth back into place.”

“Vikings don’t have buck teeth!” Maja shouted, but other players were already pointing, jeering, and making rabbit-faces at her. Maja tried to slink away quietly, but ended up pelted from all sides by crumpled gum wrappers and Frisbees.

The Mob dispersed, and the Challengers retained their undefeated title.

Ling-Wa mouthed a quiet “*danke*” to Felix, a “*gracias*” to El Gatito, an “*arigato*” to Tomoko, and an “*obrigada*” to Weez.

Tyler felt a knot in his stomach. *He* was the team captain. *He* should have been the one to step forward. *He* should have made Maja back down. And if Ling-Wa needed more confidence in herself, *Tyler* should have been the one to give her a pep-talk. Instead, he’d just stood there, frozen, when one of his best players had needed him most.

So much for the legendary Captain Tyler Sato, he thought. As it turned out, Tyler was as useless on the sidelines as he was on the playing field. That hadn’t mattered during pre-season training, but it would be a disaster as the hours counted down to the start of the Galaxy Games Tournament.

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NEGZOR COLLECTIVE, PLANET THREE:

Ffargax shifted his shape and became a two-headed frizzlebat. “Where are we going?” he asked through each of the frizzlebat’s mouths separately, and then through both at once.

“I can not say,” Spawn-Father stated. “And I don’t appreciate being harmonized at.” The elder Ffifnaxian fixed his eyes straight ahead down the hallway while Ffargax continued flapping around his head.

A Bjarnigast turned the corner ahead and rumbled toward them with its bare claws clicking on the tile floor. Ffargax perched on Spawn-Father’s broad shoulder and watched. Had the bulky alien made an odd salute toward Spawn-Father? The same salute as the Dentillian back in the landing bay? And hadn’t Spawn-Father returned each of those salutes with his own?

“What was the message that brought us here, Spawn-Father? This can’t be a simple trade mission, like you said. You’ve never brought me along on a trade mission before.” The young shape-shifter became a fuzzy yellow Garm cube and plopped his bulk directly into his spawn-father’s path. “I’m not moving until you tell me what’s really going on.”

“I can not say.” Spawn-Father’s form, as always, was a massive Cordellian bladderbelt, which plowed Ffargax aside as easily as a drillship plowing through an asteroid.

“You can’t say because you don’t know?” Ffargax pressed. “Or you can’t say because there might be Dwogleys listening in?”

Ffargax had only been teasing, because Spawn-Father took those old myths way too seriously. He wasn’t prepared when Spawn-Father turned his angry eyes around and puffed out his bladderbelt throat-sack. “I CAN NOT SAY!” he shouted, with such volume that Ffargax’s molecules melted into goo.

Ffargax remained as a shock-puddle for a moment before popping out a reptilian eye and set of mandibles on a stalk. “Why didn’t you just say so?”

“Take a proper form,” Spawn-Father ordered. “If you mix and match body parts, you’ll harden that way. Think of your Great Spawn-Aunt Glynnagara.”

A ripple passed through Ffargax’s puddle form at the

thought of Aunt Glynngara, the shame of Planet Ffifnak. Due to her indecisiveness as a youth, she had hardened as Vremtaxianiod on her left side, and Gormic on the right, and was always at war with herself. Ffargax quickly snapped into the form of a many-tentacled Mrendarian. This way, no matter where Spawn-Father led him, Ffargax would have a slime trail to follow back to safety.

The hallway dead-ended at a huge metal door, guarded by a pair of Zeverians with jagged spikes along the limbs of their black and red exoskeletons. Spawn-Father made his secret gesture and the Zeverians stepped aside.

Ffargax and Spawn-Father passed through the doorway into a downward tunnel that ended in a small circular chamber carved out of granite bedrock. Rings of theater-style seating rose on all sides, scaled to fit a wide variety of galactic beings. Entire sections were enclosed in specialized atmosphere enclosures or water tanks, and each seat featured its own phonic-sphere and flickering holographic interface. "It's like a stadium, but smaller," Ffargax noted. "A theater, perhaps?"

Spawn-Father nodded almost imperceptibly.

Although hundreds of beings could have fit into the theater, the seats were empty except for one. In a boxed section that jutted out from the rest, an orange macrobe

hovered, oval in shape, with a translucent body that allowed Ffargax to see her seatback in a fuzzy outline. Single-celled macrobes were common throughout the galaxy, but this one had a glow unlike any of the clone lines Ffargax had ever seen.

“Seal us in,” the macrobe commanded. Organelles pulsed under her membrane, and a field of cilia rippled up and down her body like plant stalks in a strong breeze.

“At once, Supreme Leader,” said Spawn-Father.

Ffargax blinked all three of his Mrendarian eyes. In all his life, he’d never seen Spawn Father take orders from anyone.

Thick bladderbelt fingers fumbled over a control console. A metal door slid across the tunnel exit, and every surface in the room buzzed with vibrations. “Causality bubble engaged, Supreme Leader.”

“Causality bubble?” asked Ffargax.

“This council chamber now exists outside of space and time,” the macrobe explained.

Ffargax popped a nostril-hole with a shrill whistling. “Sounds expensive.”

The macrobe’s orange glow intensified. “Have a seat, young Ffifnaxian.” Her pseudopod indicated the chair to her right in the luxury box.

“My name is Ffargax.” He remained on his foot-

tentacles in the center of the stage.

“Boy! Do not disobey the Supreme Leader!” Spawn-Father ordered.

“Stand or sit, it matters not.” The macrobe’s carefree voice was matched by her hypnotic waves of cilia.

“Yes, of course,” said Spawn-Father. “The important thing is that he listens.”

Ffargax’s three eyes boggled at the sight of Spawn-Father conceding an argument. A chill passed down his spinal support column. He climbed into a seat, but made sure it was in a section on the opposite side from the macrobe, with the entire stage between them. “What exactly are you the supreme leader of?” A floating phonic-sphere transmitted his words across the void.

Spawn-Father tensed, but said nothing.

“Ours is an ancient order sworn to protect the galaxy, to defend the Galaxy Games, and to promote galactic civilization. When our ruling council is in session, this chamber holds representatives from a hundred worlds.” The Supreme Leader’s body varied its glow as she spoke. “An opportunity has arisen for you to join us, young Ffifnaxian.”

“Is that so?” asked Ffargax.

“It is,” said the Supreme Leader. “Thanks to a helpful informant, we have identified the latest Messenger of the Dwogleys!”

Ffargax closed his three Mrendarian eyes and steamed out a snicker. "The Messenger? The one and only being in the entire galaxy who can hear the Dwogleys speak? The silliest part of the silliest myth in the history of silly?"

The Supreme Leader slammed her pseudopods on the balcony railing, causing Ffargax to jump back and transform himself into a Tjuffian with a reinforced exoskeleton.

"Mind your words, child," said the macrobe. "You have seen nothing of the galaxy, while I am the 514th daughter-cell in an unbroken line of Supreme Leaders. Do you think yourself a better judge of reality than I am? Do you think my line would waste over five hundred lifetimes hunting a myth?"

"I would hope not," Ffargax admitted.

"In every generation, a Dwogley Messenger pops up somewhere in the galaxy. The Messengers are a tool that those nasty invisible creatures could use to shape the universe of baryonic matter, if we were to allow it. But from the dawn of galactic history, it has been our sacred duty to eliminate each new Messenger by any possible means."

"You eliminate them?" Ffargax laughed. "That almost sounds like you kill them."

"It does sound like that," the Supreme Leader stated.

Ffargax stopped laughing. He noticed Spawn-Father's muscles tense in his bladderbelt shoulders and limbs. Could he really believe this insanity?

"For an assignment such as this, we need somebody with an advanced language implant—a Galaxy Games player." The Supreme Leader pointed a pseudopod in Ffargax's direction. "It is also helpful for our agent to blend into an alien society and reach the Messenger without being detected. In the past we've had our best luck with young Ffifnaxian shape-shifters, like yourself, who haven't yet hardened into a permanent form."

In the past? Ffargax turned to confront Spawn-Father. "You had an opportunity like this when you were my age, didn't you? There was a Dwogley Messenger they asked you to kill, and—you didn't do it, Spawn-Father, did you?"

"Joining the Order made me the Ffifnaxian I am today," Spawn-Father stated.

Ffargax felt sick to his second spleen. "What if I don't want to be the Ffifnaxian you are today? What if I don't want to be a murderer?"

Spawn-Father hardened his gaze. "Your mission will protect our way of life."

"Your way of life, maybe. The Galaxy Games are my way of life."

"Child," the Supreme Leader spoke softly, "I love the

Galaxy Games as much as you. We all do. The games are central to everything we do here at the Order.”

Ffargax’s thick Tjuffian eyebrows clanked open and shut in surprise. “That seems hard to believe. The games are a celebration of living, not—” He couldn’t bring himself to say the words. “Not what you’re asking me to do.”

The Supreme Leader’s glow shifted to a rusty shade, closer to red than orange. “The fondest wish of the Dwogleys is to destroy the Galaxy Games. Without the civilizing influence of the tournament, our entire galaxy would be plunged into never-ending chaos, war, and death!”

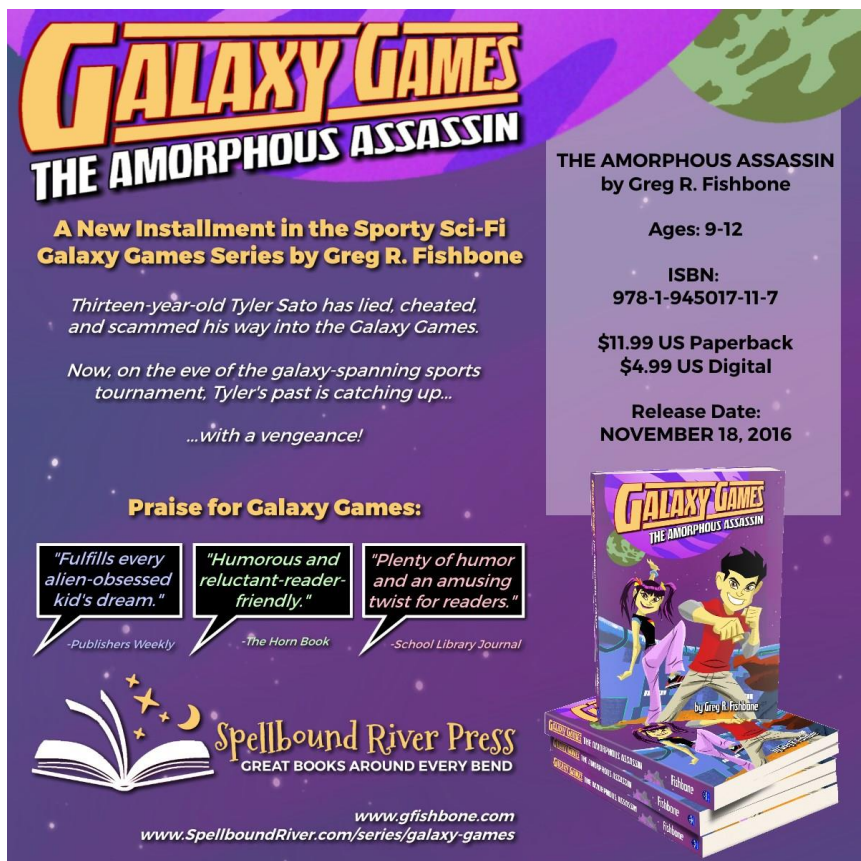
Ffargax tried to imagine a galaxy without the games, without challenges between the worlds, and without his own team that advances the interests of Planet Ffifnak. If he couldn’t play the game, if he couldn’t even watch, what kind of life would he have?

Ffargax looked down at the sharp points on his serrated claws. “How can I save the games?”

The Supreme Leader reached a pseudopod into her body and pulled out a purple crystal. She plugged it into a data port, and a huge spinning hologram appeared in the space above the stage. “This being’s name is Tyler Sato. He is the Galaxy Games Captain of Planet Earth, and you must eliminate him any way you can.”

"I will," said Ffargax. He thought he saw Spawn-Father's bladderbelt mouth curve upward at the corners, but that would be impossible. As far as Ffargax had ever known, Spawn-Father never smiled.

To be continued . . .



GALAXY GAMES
THE AMORPHOUS ASSASSIN

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Thirteen-year-old Tyler Sato has lied, cheated, and scammed his way into the Galaxy Games.

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