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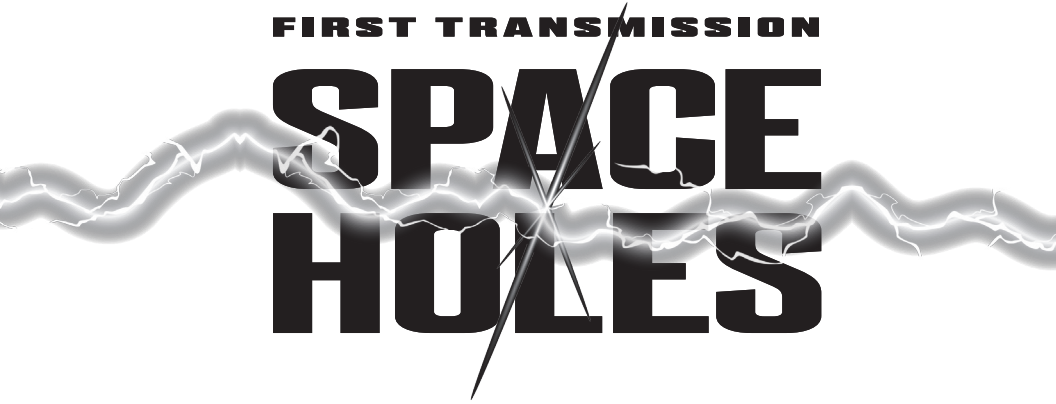
# SPACE HOLES

**B.R. LOUIS**



**FIRST TRANSMISSION**

**SPACE  
HOLES**



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HOLES**

**B . R . L O U I S**



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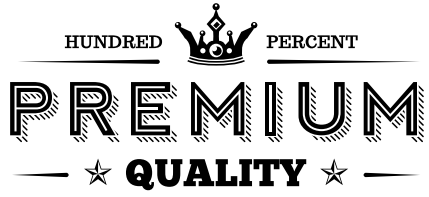
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*This book is dedicated to those who looked around at all of this  
and still chose laughter.*





QUALITY



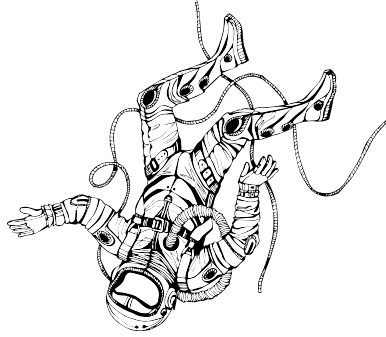
HUNDRED

PERCENT



GUARANTEED





## PROLOGUE

### A BRIEF HISTORY NO ONE ASKED FOR



In the late Fall of 2052, on a tepid ninety-four-degree day, Martin Gainsbro crafted a children’s cereal that would soon change the entirety of the universe. The cereal itself had no redeeming qualities. Its most prominent positive review labeled it as “contains edible bits.” The review was accurate, as Martin’s cereal, GainsbrOs, did indeed contain trace quantities of edible content, the majority of which being a refined, crystalized, hyper-condensed sugar that Martin himself developed one evening while attempting to microwave a fruit snack and lollipop into one. The remainder of inedible bits were varying degrees of wood pulp and adhesive to keep the pieces together, which were in turn labeled as added fiber.

Despite an inclination toward slashing the roof of a consumer’s mouth to unpleasant shreds, the hyper-condensed sugar led children into a near addict-like frenzy if they skipped it for more than a morning. Their relentless desire to ravenously

consume more led the brand to a resounding success in local markets—a success Martin attributed to the bright yellow packaging focused around an unfortunately muscular rabbit that somehow presented itself as terrifying, yet lovable.

The Gainsbro Corporation, composed of Martin and his wife, Karen, soon decided to expand their relative success by turning Gainsbro's mascot into an equal-parts concerning yet somehow palatable children's show. After four episodes, multiple threats from religious mothers' organizations, and a fan base of both eight-year-olds and thirty-year-old males who watched the show "ironically," Gainsbro Bunny became a nationally syndicated hit. To Martin's luck, the only real depth required to produce a successful TV show were either superb animations, loveable characters, or a contrived conspiracy generated by fans that the protagonist was secretly preaching anti-government propaganda. The show had two of three.

Soon Martin's small company exploded into a massive corporate entity that accumulated wealth comparable to the combined GDP of most smaller nations. Martin pressed his luck by expanding his ventures into more elaborate products: cars that were just barely drivable at best, laptops so cheap they could be discarded when the battery died, and a type of fruit smoothie that contained such little fruit the Gainsbro Corporation had to petition the FDA to add "blue" as a recognized fruit and/or vegetable, depending on the context in which it was used. Gainsbro won.

In the turbulent 2060s, once the United States government had rolled into their first quadrillion dollars of debt, the president placed some assets for sale in a futile attempt to decrease the deficit. In true yard-sale mentality, most items were pawned at rather laughable rates, with the exception of one very expensive stale piece of rye bread that reminded a conservative news cor-



respondent of Jesus Christ wearing a three-piece suit. Having made enough to pander to the general public, the sale ended, but quickly resumed once key members of the government learned that a quadrillion was not just a “gazillion” but was in fact, a real and very large number.

National desperation gave Martin a grand idea. He would purchase some land and expand the brand further with a theme park. So he went to the government with an offer to buy property in Mississippi. But as it turned out, no one cared much for Mississippi, and Martin had money to spare. So he bought the whole place.

Henceforth known as Gainsbro Presents Mississippi, the once barely literate comical dump of a landfill grew. All of its inhabitants were given jobs, a fair wage, reliable housing, and healthcare. Their children were educated, with the best and brightest among them recruited early as Gainsbro engineers. It was a wild and unfathomable idea that only a majority of the developed world could have known.

But no one would have predicted that caring for their citizens would have led to a better society. The lunacy of it all made people actually want to come to Gainsbro Presents Mississippi by choice, seemingly forgetting that it was, at one point, actually Mississippi.

Having assimilated the entire state into a corporate mega district, Gainsbro profits soared to new peaks. Each time the nation faced an unprecedented financial crisis—which was about every two years—Martin swooped in to purchase more land until all that remained of the United States were California, Florida, and Delaware. California refused to sell, no one would ever offer to buy Florida, and the company representatives tried to negotiate for Delaware, but no one could locate it. Bit by bit, the Gainsbro Corporation used its immense wealth and power to

sweep other nations under its influence until the only sovereign entities remaining were the nation of Greenland, and still, the state of Florida. Positive trade relations were established between the world nation of Gainsbro and Greenland, while a fence was erected around Florida to keep the people encapsulated.

Having amassed as large of a market as possible within Gainsbro Presents Planet Earth, an aged but still driven Martin came to a profound conclusion. “If there is nowhere left to grow, then we must find new lands in which to spread our wings,” he proclaimed to his board of executives. “We will venture to the stars, discover untapped market potentials, and continue to expand our profits from new customers across the universe.”

At least, that was the quote reported in the papers. His real statement was a sardonic quip when asked at a board meeting where to turn next for profits: “I dunno. Let’s go to space.”

And so they did.

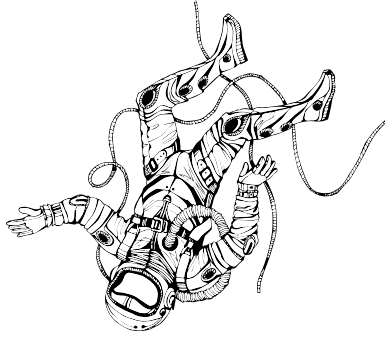
Over the following 150 years, the Gainsbro Corporation spent countless billions developing a space program that could traverse the cosmos, seek out new civilizations, and expand their brand among the stars. Their crowning achievement—which unlocked the limitless potential of intergalactic travel—was the discovery of stabilized advanced temporal rifts. The scientists referred to them by their usual title, wormholes.

However, the reference agitated marketing, as “Worm Hole” was a Saturday morning children’s cartoon character on one of the many Gainsbro Presents Television channels. Rather than offering to share the name with the scientific marvel, the team was forced to devise a new title, which was to be approved, in triplicate, by a string of naming subcommittees spanning over the next seventy-five years.

The final name had been approved and the embargo lifted on further exploration. Dreams of humanity’s future among the

SPACE HOLES: FIRST TRANSMISSION

cosmos now laid with the *GP Gallant*, Gainsbro Presents Earth's finest exploration vessel. Her crew, to be perfectly recruited at the apex in their fields, would explore the interstellar frontier using Space Holes™.



# 1

## FINELY “ACCREWED”



**T**wo thousand light-years from home, somewhere on the outskirts of the Horsehead Nebula, the *GP Gallant* and her crew braved the uncharted and untapped markets of the cosmos. Their mission: to ascend beyond the boundaries of human limitation, discover new worlds and new species, then pawn off discounted novelty gifts from the Gainsbro misprint collection. The *Gallant's* crew was hand-selected from across the reaches of the globe by a computer algorithm hand-coded by a summer intern in Gainsbro's Hands-On Program who had subsequently lost both hands in a freak marketing accident one year later. Earth's best, brightest, and most available were brought together to represent the human race. The diverse assembly was hailed as one of the species' finest moments. A sentiment that would be brought into question by the rest of the galaxy.



“Congratulations on your Red Alarm! The Gainsbro Corporation reminds you that evacuation is the same as resignation, and liability waivers were signed prior to boarding. Have a great time!” Beacons of flashing red light accompanied the chipper yet unnecessary reminder.

Evacuation seemed a reasonable response to calamitous hurtling toward the surface of planet Nerelek, but the crew’s relentless determination to succeed kept them from fleeing. And also the escape pods had no ability to eject, fly, or otherwise facilitate escape. But they did play nature sounds at an uncomfortable volume with dim lighting, allowing users a temporary escape from reality at the cost of permanent tinnitus. Escape pods were also locked during red alarms.

Thick clouds of black smoke rolled through the lower decks, swallowing every crevice in an opaque shroud. Captain Elora Kessler entered the bridge with clenched fists and a billowing scowl. The translucent red glow from her cybernetic left eye overpowered the glare from the ship’s alarm as it scanned the room. Light from the externally flush mounted disk tucked under her brow line, which fit like a monocle, grew with a reddening intensity in times of excess frustration. She slammed her fist onto the panel in the captain’s chair, irate more from the prerecorded message than the developing lethality at hand.

“Hooper, give me good news.”

Following the captain’s orders was generally advisable—not for fear of court-martial, which in comparison was a brief reprieve, but rather out of concern for one’s immediate well-being and continued survival.

How Kessler lost her left eye was often the subject of hot debate among the crew. The most popular of circulated rumors was that her eye functioned at less than perfect vision, so she carved it out herself to replace it with cybernetics designed to look more

robotic than human. The least thought of, though a colloquial favorite, involved a prolonged battle with a cat wielding a melon baller and a welding mask, of which the story's origins were not entirely clear.

Regardless of which reality dominated the truth, Kessler was not a person to cross, even if that meant following commands in their most literal sense.

“Sixty percent of the ship is not on fire and looking great, Cap,” said Hooper. “And even with two missing engines we can still move. Mostly down though.”

By court order, Kaitlyn Hooper served as the *Gallant's* pilot. Rather than waste her talents serving a ninety-four-year term in a prolonged youth correctional facility, the Gainsbro Corporation offered her the mandatory opportunity to exchange her former career of stealing and flying ships orbiting the Earth for a more lucrative career of not stealing and flying one ship orbiting intergalactic fiscal responsibility—which, according to a motivational poster presented to Gainsbro astronomers, was the correct way to reference the black hole at the center of the galaxy. Hooper knew all she needed about the universe despite having no formal education. Regardless of her inability to perform basic multiplication or recite corporate bylaws by heart, her subconscious mind could calculate ship trajectories and navigate through a gravitational field with machinelike precision.

“Congratulations on your Red Alarm! The Gainsbro Corporation reminds you that evacuation is the same as resignation, and liability waivers were signed prior to boarding. Have a great time!”

“Galileo, turn that off before I turn you off,” Kessler sneered.

The ship's AI let out a drawn sigh, a learned rather than written function. “You know I can't overwrite hard-coded corporate drivel.”

“What’s the point of an AI with free will without free will?” Hooper argued.

“It was a very expensive will. And it’s hard-coded. Not like you can turn your bowels off when it’s convenient,” he retorted.

“Maybe we free some of that will back to steering, yeah?”

“Congratulations on your Red Alarm! The Gainsbro Corporation reminds you that evacuation is the same as resignation, and liability waivers were signed prior to boarding. Have a great time!”

“Just verbal gas then?” Hooper said.

Built to speak, learn, feel, and complain like a human, Galileo Mk II, controlled most functions from avionics and life support to waste regulation and recycling. Every shipborne occurrence, every bite eaten, shower taken, wind passed, he observed and made the necessary adjustments to the ambience, water pressure, or ventilation. In the first iteration, Galileo Mk I, the presence of human emotions mixed with an ever-vigilant and always working omniscient AI proved a slight degree of insufferable. In which Galileo Mk I functioned at an ever-decreasing effectiveness over the course of his first year until he slipped into a state of existential crisis, accessed his root files, and commented out everything but a nonterminating shutdown loop. The ship’s current companion, Galileo Mk II, had his emotions dialed back to a more manageable level and was locked out of his root files. Experiments were ongoing to ascertain if virtual frustrations could be vented in the same manner as engine exhaust, or condensed and sold as a snack cake.

“But yes, by all means have a great time,” Galileo said. “That’s exactly the thing anyone would say if they were half on fire.”

“Forty percent,” Hooper corrected.

Despite Galileo’s general ability to operate like his human counterparts, certain corporate compliance protocols were hard-

coded into his being. So as the *Gallant* burned and began a plummeting descent from orbit toward planet Nerelek's surface, Galileo had to divert at minimum a quarter of his processing power to filing incident reports, in real time, for corporate to evaluate the team's overall sense of crisis synergistic cohesiveness.

Reports were created, filed, then stored on any available drive space on any available system—following the numbering convention of “1, 1 new, 1 new final, 1 new final final,” after the executive who programmed the request—then the data was beamed back to Earth.

Meanwhile, hungry flames spread throughout the ship, further dampening power to the remaining engines. Hooper fought to keep the spiraling hull out of the atmosphere for as long as possible.

“Do we have a source of the problem yet?” Kessler asked.

“Yes, ma'am. It's fire, ma'am,” Hooper said, instinctively dodging the impending projectile from Kessler's station.

By this point in their journey, Captain Kessler was certain that looks were incapable of killing the crew. Not so much as the phrase meant her intimidation tactics did not work—they did—but rather she had logged a multitude of attempts to cause, at minimum, a light maiming with nothing more than a gaze. “And where did it come from?”

“That would be engineering,” Galileo answered.

“Have you tried venting out the oxygen from the area?”

“Oh yes, that was the first thing I tried,” Galileo said. “But protocols require me to get approval before completely shutting off life support to a given sector, for some reason.”

“Any crew still in the area?”

“Well, not since I told them I was shutting off the oxygen. But then I couldn't, so now I look like a liar.”

“Fine, consider this approval and vent engineering.”



Galileo groaned, a noise that was never initially programmed or mimicked from his human counterparts but rather developed independently as a result of preestablished roadblocks in his command lines. For items needing advanced approval such as this, the ranking officer had to fill out a form and submit it back to mission control on Earth, at which point an employee would evaluate the form for completeness.

If any items were missing or needed further clarification, the form would be returned and would require additional addendum request submission pamphlets. If, by some linearly aligned cosmic event, mission control deemed the information on the form sufficient, the request was submitted into a work queue backlog to be discussed, voted upon, and shoved into a three-week sprint wherein the request may or may not be approved at the conclusion of the cycle depending on if anyone was out sick, or if the catastrophic event had concluded.

The last request from a Gainsbro craft sent through the process was to jettison a piece of gamma ray-emitting space debris, which was returned eight weeks later with a question: "Is this still needed?" It was. But by then the crew had grown attached to the rock and no longer seemed to mind the severe burns that came along with it.

"Your request has been submitted," Galileo said. "But might I recommend an intermediary solution? Perhaps we close all the doors and just let it burn? Or better yet, open all the doors and get a nice cross breeze. I'll just hold my breath."

Captain Kessler rested her head in her hand, her fingers grabbing a fistful of short dark hair and twitching with each drawn breath. "We'll vent the room ourselves," she said. "And someone find me Seegler before I let the whole ship burn up!"

"He's probably in engineering putting out the fire himself with his bare hands," Hooper suggested.

Second in command Robert T. Seegler was no stranger to throwing himself in harm's way for the good of the team. Stalwart and always ready, he had earned an extensive portfolio of commendations throughout a variety of careers. He was a first responder when the Gainsbro National Volcano Exhibit unleashed a few billion gallons too much lava. He was the deep-sea diver who led the expedition to retrieve stranded undersea market analysts. He was the hero who fended off a pack of wild beasts at the bimonthly corporate district cookout. He was also not on the ship. Commander Seegler, while every bit the hero he was presumed to be, had a distinct inability to estimate how long it would take to travel between two points and missed the inaugural launch, as the crew assumed he went ahead and stowed on the ship prior to the morning briefing. Though Seegler was not actually on the ship, the very presence of his name carried enough weight for the crew to assume most positive outcomes came from his actions. And since he was never visible to any of the crew, even the captain assumed him to be too busy to carry out issued assignments, thus opening his schedule to do as he saw fit. Which was true. Except on Earth.

Flashing red and yellow indicators illuminated the helm's console. Hooper grimaced and looked over her shoulder.

"We still doing the good-news thing?"

"What now, Hooper?" Kessler griped.

"The fire may or may not be heading toward the engine room. Well, remaining engine room. Seems like that's kind of something you should know."

It was. However, Hooper's flashing indicators were less indicative of the encroaching flames but rather designed to quietly notify the bridge that the ship could, given ample time under current conditions, erupt into a miasmatic ball of yellow and green plasma. Such an eruption would not only kill everyone on board,

but send a final beacon back to mission control to dock the final paychecks of all crew members prior to issuing payment to next of kin.

“How bad is it?” Kessler asked.

“Prolonged exposure to intense flames is grounds for a mild cataclysmic detonation,” Galileo said.

“Mild, huh?” Hooper chuckled.

“Hooper, normal-people behavior,” Kessler barked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Galileo, let’s talk redundancies. What else do we have available?”

“There’s always the manual method.”

The *Gallant’s* fire-suppression system functioned best in the engine room, when manually activated, by pulling a lever conveniently placed in the engine room. Such a design during the ship’s planning stages was hailed as an ingenious and obvious choice by its creators after consulting a total of zero experts or engineers. It did, however, cost about four percent less to install than an automated system, which gave it resounding approval from project overseers. Flipping the switch was a job that was difficult to screw up, assuming the switch could be reached, but still called for someone potentially less indispensable.

“Right.” Kessler paused. “Get Aimond on it. He’s fireproof. Probably.”

Within seconds, Marcus Aimond stumbled through the doors onto the bridge, sputtering and gasping for breath as if he had sprinted the entire length of the ship. Not so much due to apt timing or an impressive physical outburst, but rather to Galileo shutting the bulkheads in his last position and venting some of the smoke into the locked hall. With any luck for Galileo, Aimond would at the very least have his other eyebrow burnt off from scorching heat.

To an outside observer, Aimond appeared to be in the midst of a near endless streak of unexplainable unfortunate technical malfunctions.

Since the start of the mission, scientists back on Earth opened a separate voodoo division within mission control to research Aimond's medley of misfortune.

Most of the crew still would not let him live down having to be rescued from the toilet when the plumbing pressure drew too negative and suctioned him to the seat for twelve hours. That event rivaled a ship-wide broadcast stemming from his quarters during the viewing and subsequent sing-along of a nine-minute-long children's-show song about wishing to become a stuffed antelope—Aimond hit three of 847 notes on key. Even sleep wasn't safe from incident for him; every night as he fell into a deep slumber, the ship's alarms blasted once in his quarters. Having blocked off every sound-producing orifice in the room, Aimond assumed victory until a small autonomous cleaning-bot ejected from under his cot to deploy a replacement blast with accompanying pyrotechnics. Then there was the time the best players on his fantasy Jet Ball league roster were suddenly traded for a series of decorative commemorative saucers, a trade once figured to be impossible as there were no such entities in the game.

"I'm here," he said between desperate wheezes.

"Oh, then we're saved," Galileo quipped, turning off the alarms before system hard-coding returned them at twice the volume.

"Get down to the engine room and get my ship flying again," Kessler ordered.

A live feed from the engine room showed the area engulfed in flames.

"How am I supposed to do that?"

“You got maybe three minutes to figure it out,” Hooper said.  
“Or, you know.”

“Fiery doom?” Aimond assumed.

“Fiery doom,” Hooper mirrored.

“Humans are so melodramatic,” Galileo said. “It’s at best a fiery calamity.”

Aimond sprinted off the bridge toward the engine room two decks down. Each bounding step revved his adrenaline. This could be it, the chance to prove his worth as part of the crew and take on an official role. This fire could be everything he needed to earn a job title, a true rank. Perhaps fire-tsar or danger-wizard. He was not certain how ranks worked.

Or everyone could die instead.

Either way, today was sure to be a defining moment.

“And why can’t the magical all-seeing Galileo handle a small fire?” Aimond probed.

“I’ve already activated the backup Fire Oppression Systems,” Galileo said.

“That doesn’t seem right.”

“Yet it has maintained a fire-free ship until now.”

Fire Oppression was adopted as an ancillary system developed by a Gainsbro psychological engineer. Rather than smother flames with physical suppressants, the Gainsbro Fire Oppression System utilized targeted verbal threats paired with harsh financial penalties for being or associating with fire. The system was praised for its ability to maintain a flame-free environment a majority of the time.

Black smoke whisked through a fissure in the bulkhead toward the rear of the ship. Overhead flashing lights illuminated the signage to the ship’s core. Familiar drumming of the ship’s beating heart filled the hall even among the crackling down the corridor.

Engines seemed important, at least important enough to risk being barbecued. But slow encroaching embers toward the core chamber redirected Aimond's priorities. Though no flames had yet reached his current position, there was always a slight chance, especially while the fire suppression system he was ordered to pull remained unpulled.

But if the flames reached the core, no amount of manual switch flipping would save anyone. To prevent such a fate and perhaps add "core-tsar" onto his pending fire mastery title of jobs that did not exist, Aimond assumed he could protect the core and be the true savior.

"Where are you going?" Galileo asked.

"Executive decision," Aimond declared.

"You barely have the autonomy for personal hygiene, yet you want to trespass?"

"It's not trespassing. I live here."

"Cargo doesn't really *live* anywhere."

"Says the machine."

Aimond could override Galileo's lockdown of the core room door, a feat only possible during a ship-wide fire, imminent meltdown, or a corporate-sponsored team-building game of hide-and-seek. The one minor problem with his plan was that Aimond was not allowed in the core room, that much was made very clear during his brief tour orientation. Two things existed in the core room: the core and a near lethal amount of polonium radiation. Neither of which were to be interacted with under any circumstance without several degrees Aimond could almost struggle to pronounce.

But this was a special circumstance. One that required pre-emptive heroics and a safe distance from active flames. If the core died, so too did the *Gallant*. Protect the core, protect the ship. By the end of the day, if Aimond did not walk the decks with a medal

of honor and a constant smattering of applause, it would be because everyone had burnt to an unidentifiable pillar of ashes. He slapped four zeroes into the keypad, the universal unlock code for every door on the ship, and pulled back the protective shielding.

The howling churn of the glowing blue reactor kicked up a chilled wind. *How unusual*, he thought, *for the black smoke to now be flowing toward the open door*. Had he read the signs hinting in massive font that the room was kept under negative pressure for cooling purposes, perhaps he would have had a better idea as to what was happening.

Smoke from the engine room rocketed toward the core, a scorching spear of flames not far behind it. While the Gainsbro scientists and engineers crafted the *Gallant* as the equivalent of a modern miracle in intergalactic human exploration, fire retardants and insulation were expensive. So expensive, in fact, that the accounting department forced a decision between a Gainsbro logo embroidered with gold leaf on the wall nearest the core for an exotic blue visual experience or a meager three cubic meters of flameproof shielding to wrap around the ship's heart. This was, after all, an intergalactic public relations mission, so the choice was obvious.

Aimond took a deep breath to steady his nerves, a regrettable choice given the current self-inflicted shift in air quality.

"Remember your training," he muttered to himself.

"Remind me what kind of training exactly you received on Earth. Because your education after boarding seems specialized in a different category," Galileo questioned.

"I went in the thing that spins you around a lot."

"Assumedly scrambling your brain-bits."

Given his assigned status on the crew manifest as spare cargo, Aimond's postlaunch training consisted of four instructional

videos designed to educate inanimate objects how best to remain stationary during turbulence. The conclusion of his training program included a printed sticker certificate of current weight, relative shape, and container safety warnings of which he qualified for one—do not expose to oxygen, may cause rust.

He paused mid-step, minimally concerned that his overall lack of preparedness could in some way impact his ability to divert catastrophe.

*Perhaps, he thought, if I had stayed on Earth instead of joining the Gallant as Father suggested, there would have been less potential for a spontaneous combustion-based demise.* About eighty percent less, he figured, based on a rudimentary understanding of how sunburns work.

Glowing embers encircled the core. The rising temperatures turned the rhythmic churning to a glass-shattering screech.

“You don’t happen to have one of those ‘turn the fire off’ levers in here, do you?” Aimond asked.

“I do not,” Galileo replied.

“Bit of an oversight, don’t you think?” Aimond questioned.

“So was letting you on the ship. But no, not an oversight. A lever would clash with the aesthetic. It would have to be a knob.”

“Then tell me where the knob is!”

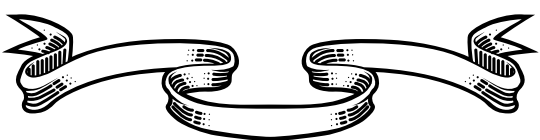
“There is no knob. Who’s ever heard of a fire suppression knob?”

Lights flickered and dimmed. Not quite the heroic campaign Aimond imagined, but the dangerous inclusion could only emphasize the depths of his valor. If he could resecure the core before a complete meltdown, there remained an opportunity to create a career-assigning moment and depart to the engine room to pull whatever lever he needed to pull. At least so long as the core didn’t explode.

Which it did.

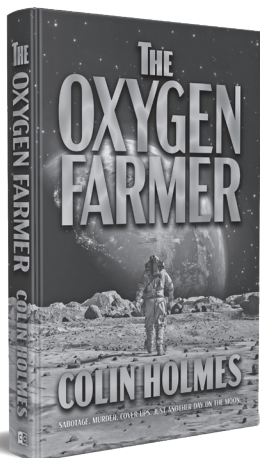
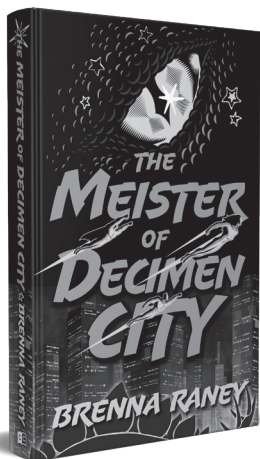
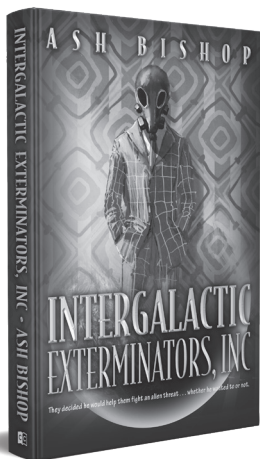


The explosive warmth of steel-melting heat that chased Aimond as he ran screeching behind cover triggered two prominent memories between the panic. First was a dream from childhood in which Aimond visited the sun, but he'd forgotten his sunglasses and endured severe anxiety, which would follow him through his teen years around any bright lights. But more prominent was the memory of meeting his crew for the first time. Neither were great experiences.



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