

**PANIC! HORROR IN SPACE: BOOK 1**



**CHRISTINA ENGELA**

# **Static by Christina Engela**

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## **Introduction by Christina Engela**

“Panic! Horror In Space” is about horror. Well, no, it’s really sci-fi. No, wait – it’s both. Actually, it’s horror in a sci-fi setting, wrapped up as a thriller around a core of suspense, with sprinklings of action and adventure. “Panic! Horror In Space” is a series of science-fiction-horror stories in the same setting featuring mostly the same regular characters, with the occasional introduction of new faces.

Originally launched in 2017 as a horror-sci-fi story in a series of connected short fiction installments, the series was completely taken apart line by quivering bloody line, and put back together again as a longer, bolder and thoroughly more enjoyable offering.

### **What’s the series about?**

While on an otherwise routine deep-space mission to chart new territory on the frontier of unknown space, the Pioneer Fleet starship Mercury is probably the unluckiest ship in history. Not once, not twice, but many times over, the same hapless crew – give or take a few dozen casualties – on a supposed voyage of deep space exploration, stumble into the weird, wake the creepy and trip over the downright terrifying and possibly even supernatural...

The “Panic! Horror In Space” series came about by complete chance in 2017, when I was in the process of finishing off some incomplete short stories which I intended to put into a sequel for “Space Sucks!” called “Space *Really* Sucks!” I took a very short old high-school essay I wrote back in 1987, then called “The Curse”, and rewrote it into a considerably longer story called “Mercury Rising”.

My wife Wendy, who was my fiancée at that time, deserves the credit for encouraging me to write a sequel to that story – which became “Mercury Resurgent” and to then turn it into a standalone sci-fi horror series! Whew!

So, after some time spent hammering away at my keyboard, it was rewarding indeed when fellow South African sci-fi author Anike Kirsten reviewed that first story very positively!

Reading is supposed to be fun, and if the writer enjoyed writing it, it's likely that the reader will enjoy reading it as well. "Panic" is fun to work on, and the feedback I've had from my readers has been very positive! "Panic!" is set in The Galaxii Series universe, using many of the same settings, references and background material, but it's a stand-alone series with its own characters and events.

### **What Can Readers Expect From 'Panic'?**

Strong character writing and suspense firstly, and secondly, horror elements like zombies, ghosts, haunted or cursed objects as well as assorted kinds of paranormal activity are likely to feature in a variety of settings such as abandoned places, and derelict space ships or stations.

"Static", the first book in the new "Panic! Horror In Space" series, was re-launched in June 2019 with a brand new cover and containing 60,443 words.

"Life Signs" – book 2 – stands at 64,943 words.

I sincerely hope you enjoy reading them as much as I did writing them!

Best regards,

Christina Engela

## Part 1: Mercury Rising

Imagine, if you will:

The Terran starship *Mercury* sped through deep space at warp speed like a streak of extremely agitated light. Fatigued by the mere thought of all the *exercise* this evoked, Captain (junior grade) Stuart Flane was taking a well-undeserved rest in his quarters. Lying face down on his bed – with his head underneath his pillow, Flane deeply pondered the term used to describe his lodgings. He stretched out lazily, groaning with irritation as his feet – which hung over the bottom limit of his bed and wrapped only in his regulation black nylon socks – touched the outboard bulkhead of his cabin. He concluded that, considering how small this ship was, the size of his quarters might well account for 25% of its total volume!

Knowing that the infinite emptiness of space, the galaxy and the immense *nothingness* that was just on the other side of the bulkhead and speeding past him at several times the speed of light, was just a few feet away from his – well, *feet* – made him feel slightly safer. For the moment. At least all of that wasn't on the *other* side of his body, where his head was. Well, it was – but at least there was a lot more *ship* on that side. *Well, okay* he admitted to himself rather grudgingly – a *little bit* more ship. The *Mercury* was a Ningan class battlespringer after all, and they were rather small.

Like most ships of the Pioneer Fleet, I.S.S. *Mercury* was in unknown space for the purposes of making it into *known* space. Flane and his crew were quite good at that, by his own estimation – after all, they'd spent about 4 months exploring deep space without so much as a respite – or being allowed to return home for a little R.N.R. So they took it where they could find it.

“Captain Flane to the bridge!” A voice called over the intercom at his bedside. Flane stirred, pondering the degree of necessity that might motivate him to do more.

“Captain Flane to the bridge!” The voice called again. He surfaced through a gap in his pillows, blinking in the dim lighting in his cabin and

taking a breath of slightly colder, fresher air, as he reached over for the intercom and pressed something in the hope that it was the right button for ‘*Somebuddy make it stop! Geezuss!*’

“I hope there’s a good reason to wake me up at two thirty in the morning, crewman!” He grunted.

“*Uh* – it’s two thirty P.M. sir!” came the amused reply. Flane cursed under his breath.

“Well – same thing!” He replied. It was hard to tell the difference by looking out a viewport – the stars were always out – and anyway, it was always dark. “What is it?”

“Something you should see, sir!” the crewman reported, “Unknown ship off the port bow!”

“What kind of ship?” Flane snapped. “What’s it doing?”

“Uhm... an ‘*unknown*’ ship?” the crewman on the bridge replied rather cheekily. “At the moment it’s just sitting there. You’d better come see it for yourself, sir.”

A few minutes later, Captain Stuart Flane arrived on the bridge of the *Mercury*. In case it hadn’t been mentioned before, she was a small ship, so the delay in his arrival couldn’t be explained by the journey-time alone, but suggested that the Captain had taken his sweet time about it.

The bridge of a Ningan class ship was typically small and relatively crowded with control desks for the helm, weapons array, communications, sensors, and a snug little command seat for the CO right in the center. In fact, the bridge on a battlespringer was so cramped that jokes abounded in the Fleet that it came equipped with bucket seats!

Presently – at least until Flane sat his rear end snugly in it – his was the only empty seat on the bridge. In the dimmed bridge lighting, he recognized the comtech officer, crewman McCall – and his sensor and weapons operators – two ensigns whose names he never seemed able to remember. Everyone’s attention seemed to be focused on the dark shape on the view screen at the front – Vic Chapman, his EXO, looked up as he noticed his arrival, but simply gestured at the screen without saying a word.

“What is it, Vic?” Flane asked his second in command. “Who are they?”

“Dunno.” Said Vic, a thin, clean-shaven man about 30 years of age, wearing Commander’s bars on his uniform collar. “We spotted an object in our flight path – it was motionless. When we got close enough to do a detailed scan, we noticed it was a ship and stopped. No energy output, no life-signs, and no answer to our calls.”

“Any identification?” Flane asked, his eyes drawn to the dark silhouette on the screen. The ship was adrift in space, not quite motionless – turning ever so slowly around a central axis somewhere at its center. Dark slits that could only be viewports indicated the alignment of the ships decks. It wasn’t all that big, perhaps three or four decks, in all no longer than two or maybe three hundred meters. He couldn’t see any obvious weapons. He couldn’t see any markings, ship names or registry numbers.

“None.” Vic replied. “If it’s a Terran ship, the beacon’s dead. I’m running a registry scan to see if the profile matches anything in the Fleet database.”

“Ensign...” Flane called out to the helmsman, who turned to look at him. “Uhm...”

“Porter, sir.” The young man sighed. The Captain not remembering his name was already something of a routine.

“Could you put some light on it?”

Porter turned on the forward spot lights, suddenly illuminating the dead ship in their path, aiming them from his control console, sweeping the beams over the hull this way and that.

“Nothing!” Vic Chapman breathed, puzzled. “No name, no markings, nothing.”

“Any ships in the area?” Flane asked him.

“Not a thing! Just *us*,” the EXO replied, pointing theatrically at the derelict. “And *that!*”

“Well, this is strange,” Flane sighed, appreciating his bucket seat, “But I’ve seen stranger. How long before we know if it’s in the database?”

“A minute or so.” Said Vic, checking his console display. The scan was almost complete. Less than a minute passed before he had an answer.

“Got it!” He reported aloud. “It’s a loderunner, Foreman class!”

“So it’s Terran?”

“Yes, sir!” Vic grinned. “It’s an old one – only twenty of that type were ever built – the last one was launched over forty years ago! None are

still in service – or at least *active* on the registry! Weird thing is – all but two were decommissioned and scrapped!”

“So this has to be one of those two?” Flane asked, eyebrows raised. “Right? So which one is it?”

“Maybe.” Vic said, continuing. “Thing is, neither of the two Foreman class ships that went missing, were lost in this part of space! Their last known positions are parsecs away from here!”

“When and where were they last seen?” Flane asked.

“Uhhmmm...” Vic groaned as he searched his report. “The *Kilgary* was last seen in orbit around Tegra, forty three years ago. She was reported missing, given up for lost with all hands six months later. The *Galen* was last spotted on *fire* after an accident and heading into the sun of Halon 342 twenty seven years ago. The *Galen* was confirmed destroyed by the *I.S.S. Pompeii*.”

“That’s pretty interesting stuff!” Said Flane, finding himself being drawn into the intrigue. Lost ships and space mysteries were one of the reasons why he enlisted with the Space Fleet in the first place! “So I take it this isn’t the *Galen* then?”

“Ha ha!” Vic chided. “I guess not!”

“*Kilgary*, then.” Flane nodded. “Still, I wonder how it ended up all the way over here? Wormhole? Some kind of hyperspace anomaly?”

“And what happened to the crew?” Porter added. “Missing? Dead?”

“Same thing that always went wrong on those old deep space haulers!” Said Porter’s companion beside him at the weapons console, ensign whatever-his-name-was, “*Splat!*”

“The only way to find out is to go over there and check it out!” Vic grinned at his captain. “The ship’s identification will be in the computer core – not to mention the ship’s log and – whatever else!”

After being at space for so long, Flane realized – months – the crew was cramped, cooped up and bored. So was he. This could be just the thing to alleviate their boredom. Aside from that, he was well aware that starships didn’t just go around finding derelict ships every other turn in space. It wasn’t an everyday occurrence. It could make a nice entry in his service record, even make the headlines back home for solving what must have been quite an old deep-space lost ship mystery! It looked win-win all round. He broke into a smile.



“Okay!” He said. “But let’s do a thorough scan first – I don’t want the boarding party arriving in a dangerous environment – *and nobody on the team whose name is Gary!*” This brought a chuckle from ensign Porter. “I want scans on air content, viral, life-scan, gravitational, temperatures, pressure, radiation – everything!”

“Aye sir!” Vic grinned back at him enthusiastically.

“Okay, people – let’s *do* this!” Flane ordered.

Half an hour later, six members of the boarding party – in standard issue environment-suits – boarded the transmatter platform on the *Mercury* and then materialized in the dusty darkness of what was presumed to be the lost loderunner *Kilgary*. Air temperature – and yes, there *was* air – was hovering just above zero. Atmospheric pressure was low, roughly one third normal. There was zero radiation, no chemicals, toxins, noxious gasses, or anything recognized as threatening in the air. Sensors hadn’t detected any viral components either, and no life. The ship appeared to be completely dead, or perhaps more accurately, lifeless. There were no lights on any of the wall displays or instrumentation visible where they had arrived. Captain Flane looked around at his surroundings, breathing in the cool recycled air in his environment suit. Dust had coated everything in sight. The interesting thing of course, Flane noted, there still appeared to be gravity – which meant the gravity net was still working. That meant there *had* to still be power.

The rest of the boarding party were there beside him, also wearing viro-suits – Commander Chapman, and four ensigns – Pierce, Clay and – *damn...and fuckit*. Anyway, *Damn* was from the ship’s lab and seemed to be scanning everything with his portascan – a device that looked like an overlarge pocket calculator, replete with blinking lights and a large brightly lit LCD display. *Fuckit* was some ensign he’d seen in the engine room once, in an entech uniform, holding a thing that looked like a tuning fork with lights on it. One by one, their helmet lights went on, and began to light up the inside of the dead ship like wandering search lights as they turned their heads.

“Okay, people!” Flane ordered. “Split up in teams of two, search the ship – check in with *Mercury* every twenty minutes! Vic – you’re with me! The rest of you, contact me or Commander Chapman if you find anything important!”

The party began to split up, with the teams choosing different corridors that led off from the one they had arrived in. Pierce and *Damn* went left and Clay and *Fuckit* went right. Vic pulled out his portascan from a side pocket and brought up a display to show Flane with a measure of pride.

“The schematics, deck layout, specifications, everything for this ship!” He beamed. “I got it from the database!”

“Great!” Said Flane. “Let’s find the bridge – you lead the way!”

“Into the jaws of death rode the six hundred!” Vic Chapman quipped, and took the first step ahead of Flane down the dark, dusty corridor leading deeper into the bowels of the dead ship.

“The charge of the light brigade,” Flane nodded as they moved through the silent corridors, gray with dust. Some of it sprung into the air, disturbed by their movements as they passed, settling slowly downward again. “Tennyson.”

“Very good.” Vic grinned at him inside his glazed helmet. “Will you put it on my headstone if I die?”

“Sure thing!” Flane grinned back. “One day when you’re 87 and croak from a stroke or something!”

The bulkheads were close together, the ceilings low above their helmets. Not much space in there to waste aboard the older ships. Every millimeter of plating cost money in the old days, before the New Economic System usurped the old. Every possible bit of space went to the carrying of cargo, or ‘payload’ as it was called.

“*Croak from a stroke.*” Chapman echoed, quoting his commanding officer, “You’re a poet and you don’t know it!”

“Yeah.” Flane nodded. *To quote the man*, he thought. Whoever ‘*the man*’ was. Well, whoever he was, his name probably wasn’t ‘*Fuckit*’.

“Cheer up – at least we haven’t seen any bodies... yet!” Said the *Mercury*’s resident pessimist as the pair rounded a corner where the corridor joined a T-crossing. Up ahead, a few feet from the corner, a dead

body lay sprawled on the deck. The figure was male, although his age and general appearance were hard to gauge due to the effects of exposure to the extreme cold. His freeze-dried lips had retreated and parted to show a row of bone white teeth. His medium to light brown hair was neat, as was his beige-brown company one piece overall, if a little dusty. His eyes were partly open, the lids distorted by the same post-mortem processes – with just the whites visible between them, creating a particularly hair-raising sight!

“Well... *fuck!*” Said Flane drily, as Vic’s shrill falsetto scream faded on his earpiece, before stepping over it to get past. “You had to go and tempt fate, didn’t you, Vic?”

“*Godsdammit!*” Vic muttered, his eyes locked on the grisly sight. “A dead body! I *hate* seeing dead bodies! Wait – was that me that screamed?”

“It was.” Flane confirmed.

“Oh. Sorry. Sent a chill right up my spine, that did!”

“Any ideas what killed him?” Flane asked his executive officer. Vic, apparently transfixed, recovered and pointed the portascanner at it.

“Well... *no!*” Vic replied as a puzzled expression crawled across his face. He ran a second quick scan. “That can’t be right!”

“What?”

“Well – *shit*, Captain!” Vic cried. “According to *this*, he didn’t die of anything!”

“Lemme have a go at it!” Said Flane, taking his own portascanner out of his leg-pouch and pointing it at the corpse. He ran a basic scan of it.

“Human, age 33 years, male, Eurocentric...” He read aloud. “No approximate time of death... no toxins evident, no trace of infections, viruses, unusual bacteria, no wounds or injuries or trauma... *no tissue damage?*”

“See what I mean?” Said Vic nervously in a shaky kind of voice that reminded Flane of a kid having just recounted a ghost story around a campfire at summer camp after hearing a mysterious noise in the trees.

“There’s *obviously* tissue damage! Got to be, looking like *that!*”

“But that’s ridiculous!” Flane retorted. “He’s obviously dead, and he must’ve died of something!”

“Yes, I know!” Said Vic, perplexed. “But right now, it looks like this guy just died of *death!*”

“Died of ...of *death*?” Flane echoed, feeling suddenly a little claustrophobic in the narrow dark space in the corridor. “Well, isn’t that strange!”

Rather than hover about the grisly boggle lying at their feet any longer, Flane and Vic decided to push on to find the bridge of the dead ship instead.

“The ship’s log should tell us what happened here.” Flane mused as they walked further along the dark, spooky corridor.

“You’re always the optimist, aren’t you?” Vic teased. “That’s *if* they even had time to make a log entry, *or* if they even bothered to mention anything useful in it!”

“Want to take odds on that?” Flane teased back.

“Sure!” Vic grinned, getting over his earlier traumatic experience. “I could use the extra money!”

Any potential bets were forgotten for the moment as they rounded a corner and entered a junction in the corridor. Just around the turn, they noticed a doorway in the smooth gray shadow-covered bulkhead paneling. Vic and Flane could just about make out the word “BRIDGE” in a binnacle above it that would once have been illuminated from behind. The sliding door itself stood ominously ajar, the room beyond it partly visible through the opening, shadowy, sinister and dark. Both found themselves hesitating outside.

“You first!” Flane prompted Vic, half-jokingly.

“Nope!” Vic replied, shaking his head inside his helmet. “In order of seniority: after you, Captain sir!”

Flane sighed, and stepped forward into the breach.

“Chicken!” he said, smiling as he looked Vic in the eyes, and then stepped all the way through.

To say that the bridge of the derelict ship lived up to his expectations would be an understatement. It was eerie. All was still and quiet. It was dark inside and the only light was faint starlight coming in through the row of small viewports that encircled the outer surface of the hull along the top of the bulkheads. There wasn’t as much as a glowing tell-tale light coming from one of the instrument consoles around the bridge that would

usually give a disco ball a run for its money. The main viewer at the center of the forward bulkhead was off.

More bodies lay on the deck, still and motionless, in varying attitudes and poses: a man, a woman, another man – as though they had just lain down to sleep there. A long time ago. All wore similar beige-brown uniforms of the company that had once owned this ship.

“Brr!” Said Vic’s voice by his ear. Flane turned slightly to look at his exec.

“More of the same, huh?”

“Want me to check?” Vic asked.

“Yuh.” Flane replied tersely, his eyes having found the skipper’s chair at the center of the room, dust-covered and gray in the dim lighting of their helmet-lights. Vic did a quick sweep with his portascanner.

“Yup.” He said in a still, puzzled voice “More of the same.”

“Died of death, huh?”

“Apparently.”

“Let’s hope it isn’t catching! ...Okay, let’s try to find the ship’s log.” Flane said, stepping over bodies as he began circling the bridge instrumentation. Trying to disguise his own reluctance to get any closer to the grinning corpses lying on the deck, Vic carefully followed suit. Within a few minutes it was obvious that all the controls on the bridge seemed to be completely dead.

“No power at all!” Vic sighed. Just then, Flane’s com-link beeped.

“Ensign Clay here, sir!” a voice said in his ear.

“Go ahead, ensign!” Flane replied.

“We’ve reached the engine room, Captain!” Clay reported, with apparent concern evident in his voice. “Sir, we’ve found some bodies. They’re everywhere – in the corridor, in engineering – lyin’ on the deck like they just got tired and went to sleep right there!”

“Let me guess...” Flane smiled, “You scanned them and can’t pinpoint a cause of death?”

“Yes sir! That’s exactly it!” Clay continued. “It’s creepy as fuck – er, if you don’t mind my sayin’ so, sir?”

“No, by all means.” Flane nodded. The man was perfectly right. It *was* creepy. “Go on.”

“Thing is, aside from these grinnin’ corpses that seemed to have died for no reason at all,” Clay continued, “I don’t see any damage to the

ship's systems. The fuel levels read near full, the core is still active, the main battery is low but it's still running autonomous systems – the gravity net and atmosphere processor... It looks like everything was just turned off! If I'm right, all we need to do is turn it all back on again!"

*Well that's very damned peculiar!* Flane thought.

"I see." He returned. "Clay – do me a favor: Go ahead and see if you can restore power. Just enough so that we can access the main computer and retrieve the ship's log and try to figure out what happened here."

"Do you think that's wise, sir?" Vic asked, eavesdropping. "Under the circumstances, I mean?"

"We're not going to get the ship's log otherwise, Vic." Flane retorted. Then to Clay he said. "You have your orders, Clay – oh, and one other thing – standard order 117, all team members!"

"One-seventeen? Aye, sir!"

Flane saw Vic nodding approval at his mention of standard order 117, and he knew why. On away missions, team members often wore viro-suits, which were sealed off from the outside completely. Standard order 117 assumed a risk of exposure to a hazard outside the protection of the environment suit, be it radiation, temperature, chemical, biological, or unknown, and expressly forbade the team members from opening their suits, breaking the air-seal, for example by removing their helmets.

"Good call, sir." Vic said to him.

"Well, we don't know what we're dealing with, do we?"

"Nope."

"Died of death indeed." Flane grinned. "Well, let's find out!"

A few moments later, down in the dark, creepy engine room of the old derelict ship where he'd been groping around with only the lights of his helmet to light his way, ensign Clay found the correct control panel. The fact that he'd had to carefully avoid stepping on several dead bodies lying on the deck to do so was still markedly on his mind, and goose bumps ran up and down him every time his gaze fell on them!

Cautiously, he opened the small clear access hatch and reached inside it with one gloved hand to grasp the double lever. *Wait a minute!* He thought, feeling a loose object inside the small space. His semi-sensitive

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