

PANIC! HORROR IN SPACE: BOOK 2



CHRISTINA ENGELA

# **Life Signs 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: Miora

Imagine, if you will:

Not too long ago, Captain (junior grade) Stuart Flane – commanding officer of the Terran starship *Mercury* – had received a stinging reprimand from a very angry, very senior Space Fleet officer... an officer of flag rank in the sector. The severe reprimand also came with a black mark on his service record, one which could not be removed with either a good old fashioned rubber eraser – or the passage of time.

In retrospect, Flane couldn't really blame Commodore Peters for the way she'd reacted. After all, he *had* lost a significant portion of his crew, which was rather a serious disappointment – especially if an officer expected to advance quickly up the ladder without falling off it completely. Replacement crew cost the Fleet money, and new recruits didn't come cheap. They also took considerable time and effort to grow.

Besides, it's not as if Flane could actually have done anything different in that case – except possibly to word his report somewhat *differently* – so as to omit words like “undead” and perhaps “zombie” – but *someone* had to answer for the lives lost, especially since nobody seemed to believe much, if any, of it anyway. His report on the relevant events aboard the ~~ghost-ship~~ lost loderunner *Kilgary* – although vehemently corroborated by all six surviving members of his original crew, still seemed a little too fantastic to be entirely believable! In fact, it was distinctly possible that the halls of Space Fleet HQ back on Earth still rang with peals of laughter at the mere mention of his name – but then, Captain Flane was still reasonably new and fresh, and some of the higher-ups at Space Fleet HQ still held high hopes for him.

After his somewhat severe chewing-out, Commodore Peters gave Flane a little encouragement in the form of a second chance. In a show of good faith – which in retrospect might have been a little misplaced, she arranged a replacement crew for the *Mercury* and sent the still-reeling Captain Flane back out into space on a ‘milk-run’ to babysit a small group

of paranormal investigators (one of whom had been her favorite nephew) from a famous TV show called “*Specter Adventures*”. Their destination turned out to be the most haunted abandoned Terran outpost in the galaxy – Florida-7. Milk-run. Right. What could possibly go wrong?

A couple of days later, when he returned to the starbase with his tail between his legs, Captain Flane very reluctantly – and very bravely, considering that he did so *in person* – reported that four members of the “*Specter Adventures*” crew – including the favorite nephew of the aforementioned Commodore – were missing, presumed dead... and handed over a report laced with words like ‘*paranormal*’, ‘*entities*’, ‘*invisible forces*’, and ‘*spooks*’.

What happened next was reflected later in the star-base log as an ‘*official reprimand*’, although in reality it featured a very frisky sparring session between Flane and the lively ninety-eight year old Commodore Peters (and her favorite nine-iron) across the entire length of the starbase, with six or seven very well-built security marines in hot pursuit, and a short stay afterwards in the brig for Flane. After he got out of the cooler, things carried on pretty much as before – which was part of the problem.

When Stuart Flane thought really hard about it, he realized his most recent reprimand (this time at the hands of his supervisor, Admiral Tawney) had been far less severe than the previous one – mainly because *that* one was unofficial. At least it hadn’t featured any golf clubs or threats to his physical wellbeing, or to remove him from command of the *Mercury*. Why? Well, aside from the minor detail that one of the loderunner *Marconi’s* crewmen who was under his care in *Mercury’s* sickbay at the time – had actually been *on fire* at one point ...that is, *while in the actual bed* – and that Captain Flane had taken the *Mercury* on an unauthorized joyride back to *Florida-7* (the site of his previous ignominious offense) the fact that nobody had *expired* during that little adventure did go a long way to softening Admiral Tawney’s demeanor.

Tawney had made it crystal clear that he had no appreciation for Flane’s recent reports, specifically those that lately tended to feature words like ‘*zombie*’, ‘*undead*’, ‘*supernatural*’, ‘*apparition*’, ‘*entities*’ and

‘*spirits*’ etcetera. Flane couldn’t rightly blame the man – but what was he supposed to do? *Lie*? Anyway, this time, the Admiral had given the *Mercury* what he called “*a real brain-numbingly boring assignment*” – with the parting words: “*See if you can manage to not actually bollocks anything up this time?*” Not that Flane had actually taken it up as a challenge... no.

But that was the past, Flane consoled his aching pride. Right now, Captain Flane was back where he belonged – in his command seat on the bridge of the *I.S.S. Mercury*, sipping his coffee thoughtfully from his favorite mug while watching the steam rise into the dimly-lit recycled air. *At least*, the thought comforted him, in their latest escapade nobody had actually, well – *died* this time ...or gone mysteriously missing. Things seemed to be looking up.

And so *Mercury* was in deep space, doing what it was intended to do – surveying an unexplored and uncharted star-system. Designated *Brigid* on their star-charts, the system held fourteen planets and many more times moons, orbiting an ordinary yellow star. Flane sipped his coffee, appreciating the facts of life – namely that ‘*boring*’ meant less reports involving words like ‘paranormal’ or ‘zombie’ or ‘spook’.

After a mind-numbingly boring week of surveying and exploring the outermost planets, which were rather predictably uninhabitable balls of gas, *Mercury* arrived at *Brigid-4* – a gas giant located in the system’s habitable zone, being just the right distance from its sun and roughly the same size as *Uranus*. It contained a good deal more purple in its striations than the object of that reference, and that had eight moons of its own. One of those moons was planet-sized, and looked more interesting than – well, than the rest of the system, frankly... and that’s why Flane had been called to the bridge – in a bit of a hurry. Flane liked his bunk in his cabin somewhat more these days – it was gentler on his tender bits, and given the recent trend his career seemed to be taking, he didn’t really care to explain further.

*Brigid-4* itself was completely uninhabitable, and all of its moons were small lifeless lumps of rock – except for one that appeared to have an

oxygen atmosphere, land masses and water oceans. There was a giant electrical storm over the middle of what appeared to be a vast sea on *Brigid-4.4*. The night side of the moon was shrouded in darkness – no lights shone from the land to show any sign of cities or technology.

“Okay, Vic.” Flane asked his executive officer and friend, Commander Vic Chapman, who occupied the seat beside him. “I’m here – now what was so important?”

“My report.” Vic said, smiling thinly, before passing him a small display pad.

Flane perused Vic’s report. He couldn’t help but notice it seemed a whole lot more scientific than his own were lately. That little observation aside, the planet-sized moon appeared to have supported a civilization once – quite an advanced one at that. Debris hung in orbit around it still – dead satellites, several defunct nuclear warheads, a few small ships that looked like shuttles and fighters – drifting slowly around the planet below them like bugs swarming around a corpse.

Even though the nuclear winter that held the planet in a vice-like grip had begun receding, most of the polar regions were still covered in thick sheets of ice. The tell-tale sign of radiation still clung to the surface. The equatorial region was virtually free of ice and snow, and the ruins of giant cities marked the devastated land – broken and shattered towers, craters that marked the sites of devastating explosions, collapsed structures, roadways choked with rubble and the gutted remains of long-decayed vehicles.

“The surface is dead, Stu.” Vic said aloud as Flane casually took another sip of his coffee. “Poisoned by industry as well as war. The oceans are acidic. Air and soil are slightly toxic, although the toxins and radiation appear to be at a very low reading, indicating that whatever happened here, it was a long time ago, and recovery shouldn’t be too far off – a few decades or so... There just isn’t any real life around to kick-start the recovery.”

“How long ago did this happen?” Flane asked.

“About 3000 years.” Vic replied. “Give or take.”



Flane nodded. “Any signs of life at all?”

“The only surface life we found... and there isn’t much.” Vic said, pointing at the display pad. “Microbes, algae, lichens, small insects and the like. The kind of stuff that would be more resistant to radiation poisoning.”

“Insects?”

“Of a sort. Actually, just the *one* kind of insect. This li’l bugger...” Vic explained, advancing his report by sliding his index finger on the screen Flane was holding to the point where it showed a disturbingly lifelike image of one of the creatures, which looked like something midway between a very aggressive locust and a hairy spider with an attitude problem – and large white fangs.

“I suppose you could compare them to cockroaches.” Vic continued, “but that’s only in the sense that they get into every nook, cranny or space between things – and it might take a direct blow with a ten pound hammer to kill the darn things! They eat everything – plant matter, rotting textiles, plastic – even each other – to the point where there seems to be no other animal life on the planet!”

Flane pondered the old Earth analogy of the much-feared global nuclear catastrophe in Terran history – which postulated the theory that the only things that would survive and thrive after a nuclear war – were *cockroaches*. The little add-on to that story that suggested any sentient, intelligent life that evolved on Earth after such a catastrophe, would rise from *those* survivors. What a charming thought.

“It’s an ugly little shit!” Flane smiled. Vic enthusiastically nodded and grinned his agreement. Still, Flane thought, it deserved admiration for surviving whatever had killed everything else on its world. He’d always imagined the evolution of a post-apocalyptic cockroach might result in a bipedal insectoid being that could beat him at chess (which he knew wasn’t much of a challenge) – not something dog-sized that looked like it could bite a man off at the ankles and still fancy a double cheese burger with extra pickles.

“Yuh!” Vic agreed as Flane scrolled down to the end of the report.

“Um.” Flane said, puzzled. “What’s this?”

“*That*,” said Vic, “Is why I called you to the bridge in such a hurry!”

“Well, what is it?”

“It’s a ship!” Vic explained, clearly intrigued. “Looks like it crashed on the surface, probably at the same time as this world ended... but get this! There’s a *power* reading in there, Stu! And life signs! *Life... signs!*”

“Say that again?” A slightly surprised Flane retorted.

“It’s got power. Not much, but it looks like it still has atmo, pressure and heating. Oh, and did I mention the life signs?”

“Are you sure it’s indigenous?” Flane asked, doubtfully. “Maybe it came from somewhere else much later and crashed there?”

“I thought so too – but the sensors put the timeline of that event at around 3000 years ago as well! Stu – that ship has internal pressure, heat and low power – even though the drive system is damaged and seems partly blown away!” Vic continued, his eyes opened wide like an eager young cadet. Vic was excited about this discovery alright. “...Not to mention the fact that there’s something alive in there!”

“So it could never leave.” Flane concluded, deliberately ignoring Vic’s excitement, much to his Exec’s chagrin. “And it’s been there a very long time.”

“Exactly!”

“You said something about ‘*life signs*’?” Flane asked vaguely, nodding.

“Nothing sentient.” Vic reported, perking up. “Small animals probably – different to the roaches, and diverse plant life too.”

“How’s that even possible?” Flane asked genuinely curious.

Vic reached over and expanded a different section of the report.

“Solar generators!” He grinned. “...and what looks like an ingenious capacitor storage system!”

“Hmm.” Flane nodded, taking another longer sip of coffee.

“Well?” Vic prompted, smiling at his captain.

“Well what?” Flane retorted.

“Will you call a landing party to the transmatter, or shall I?”

\* \* \*

A short time later, using the transmatter teleportation device aboard the *Mercury*, Captain Flane, Commander Chapman, and Dr. Killian arrived onboard the ship wrecked on the surface of *Brigid-4.7*. Given the nature of

their mission – which was basically just a forensic examination – and the nature of their adventures lately, nobody else wanted to come... especially the ship's security personnel – dubbed 'purple shirts' because of the color of their tunics – unless Captain Flane made it absolutely compulsory, and perhaps threw in a couple of actual threats. Purple shirts tended to die a lot, especially on the *Mercury* – not because of the color of their tunics, but more than likely because of their line of work – which was literally inserting themselves in harm's way.

Riot in the ship's mess? Mutiny below decks? *Send in the purple shirts!* Visiting dignitaries? Transporting prisoners? Boarding alien ships, taking on Corsairs in space? *Ring for security!* It was quite understandable that even after a thorough scan of the alien ship on the surface showed no hostile presences, and no security team being deemed actually necessary – and given Captain Flane's predilection for getting into trouble – none of the purple shirts wanted to come. Not even to sight see. Not even if the good Captain lowered his voice and growled a little.

Despite its age and the obvious damage it had suffered, the structure of the wrecked ship was still sound. There was no sign of corrosion or obvious decay. The alien ship was quite large – larger than the *Mercury* anyway, and seemed to have been some kind of cargo ship – a loderunner essentially. cursory scans showed likely accommodation for an estimated maximum of 400 crew. The majority of the ship's interior seemed to relate to hydroponics – and hydroponics bays occupied the bulk of its structure, which suggested that it was more of a factory-ship than a mere loderunner. In effect it could have produced more food than the crew needed – far more. But it had been damaged, and heavily. Something in the distant past had caused it to crash. The drive system was a total loss, in fact most of it seemed to be missing. The rest of the hull seemed intact though, and there was no sign of any heavy weapons onboard – nor of any radiation or toxins, other than dust. The air inside the room was a little musty, otherwise very similar to standard Terran norms and thus, safe. Consoled by that knowledge, Captain Flane sneezed almost right away.

The ship stood right side up and level on a hillside overlooking the ruin of a large city, and aside from the light coming in through windows to the

side of the room, it appeared to be completely dead at first. They had arrived in what appeared to be a crew lounge. There was no sign of life or activity; save for a dim light in a small control panel beside what was obviously a closed doorway. The carpet had begun to fray and unravel in places, and showed a few well-worn pathways that told a story of heavy use. The walls and ceiling were dull and different shades of gray, and it was impossible to tell what colors it had originally been. Green-brown stains surrounded what looked like small ventilator grids in the walls. A few badly-aged and disheveled chairs and low tables stood arranged in neat clusters about the room – and like the floor and all visible surfaces, they showed up dusty and dull in the available light. The view through the windows – which was also the only other source of light – although frightening, was also spectacular and breathtaking.

The world outside was a nightmarish landscape of death, gloom and doom – the sky was a pall of dark, menacing heavy gray clouds laced and streaked with dark purple and patches of light where the distant sunlight seemed to be trying to shine through. Strong gusts of wind tore unforgivingly at the tattered and charred remains of trees and the twisted, partly-melted corpses of power pylons in the distance so that they swayed almost imperceptibly. Lightning danced silently over the backdrop of the dead city at the bottom of the hill upon which the ruined ship rested, between the clouds and the scorched dead earth, casting awful shadows against the ruined walls of buildings, sending them in all directions. Not a blade of green showed anywhere on the ashen gray hillside, not a tree grew nearby, not a bird moved in the sky.

“Looks pretty damn dire.” Flane breathed, breaking the silence. His eyes fixed on the fascinating scene outside while not a sound of the storm outside penetrated the tomb-like silence inside the ship.

“Grim.” Vic agreed, nodding. “To think that our ancestors nearly let this happen on Earth.”

“They very nearly did – more than once.” Flane agreed in turn, thinking back to high school history class, the Economic Reformation, the Big Nuke – and the Gimp War. All were terrifying nightmarish potentially apocalyptic events in Terran history, but fortunately for Humanity, the

universe appeared to have a sense of humor. An awfully dark sense of humor sometimes, but still...

“Awful.” Said Dr. Fred Killian, smiling inappropriately. “Simply awful.”

“So – shall we look around?” Flane suggested enthusiastically, rubbing his hands together.

“You seem awfully keen to do this, Stu.” Vic noted. “For a change. What’s with that?”

“Oh. You know.” Flane smiled at his friend as the group moved towards the nearest doorway. “Just glad to be doing something different that doesn’t involve walking corpses, spooks or alien nanites. Hopefully.”

“Careful there, pal.” Vic grinned at him, laying a firm hand on his shoulder. “The day – er, night... is still young!”

Flane touched an obvious-looking little control pad beside the dusty gray door panel, which after a brief delay slid grittily aside. Nobody knew what the faded sign bearing alien glyphs above the doorway actually said the next room was used for, but the detail that it was quite a large hall – perhaps a cargo space – containing rows and rows of objects arranged neatly on the floor ...that resembled skeletal humanoid remains... was not lost on Captain Flane, who suddenly emitted a soft involuntary groan.

“Wow!” Vic breathed fascinated, taking in the macabre scene as the sound of Flane’s self-inflicted face-palm faded from hearing. “This must be the whole crew – there must be hundreds of them!”

“Three hundred and eighty-seven, to be exact.” Dr. Killian added, looking up from his portascanner. The fact that Fred Killian was smiling wasn’t lost on Flane as they slowly stepped into the room and began walking along the dusty pathways that had been left open between the multiple rows of bodies. They were mostly dry bones now, some covered by dry thin skin that had turned various shades of brown over the centuries past. Most they saw still seemed relatively intact, together. Most had gray or white hair, but some, a few, had black or brown hair, discernible despite a covering of dust.

“Any idea cause of death?” Vic asked the doctor telegraph style.

“Hard to say.” Said Killian consulting the small instrument which he used to scan the relics, narrowly missing stepping on a bony foot that had

strayed out from under its blanket. “There’s not much left to be honest. No broken bones evident – and the bodies are of varying ages, like they didn’t all die at once, but gradually over a period of years.”

“*Years?*” Flane baulked, letting his eyes wander over the small piles of bones, some apparently still wearing decaying clothing and partly covered by blankets. “You mean they didn’t all die at once? Like from radiation?”

“No sir.” the doctor replied. “I’m not reading any traces of radiation poisoning at all. From the look of it, this is more like a graveyard. A cemetery.”

“Perhaps ‘mausoleum’ is more appropriate.” Flane observed, before sneezing again.

“People survived the crash.” Vic theorized. “Yes, they survived, but as the ship was too badly damaged, so they couldn’t leave the planet again – and because the world outside was too hostile, they were trapped in here...”

“For years...and years...” Flane continued, contemplating the dreary thought of passing his last years in such a dismal place, trapped within the walls of a dead ship. “So they put their dead in here instead, as they died of sickness, perhaps eventually hunger, thirst, old age...”

“Suicide too.” Killian suggested rather too cheerfully.

“Um.” Said Vic, pondering the predicament the survivors must have endured on that ship after the end of their world, perhaps watching and hearing the final death throes of their entire civilization while being helplessly trapped themselves – while every day brought news of fewer resources and more strife. He shook his head to clear away the somber thoughts.

“Let’s show these folks some respect and move on.” Said Flane, not a fan of the macabre – or the dust it implied. “Let’s see what else there is to see on this barge – where are the animals your scans picked up, Vic?”

His friend and second in command quickly consulted his portascanner.

“That way.” Vic replied, pointing.

The sensor readings led the party through another doorway on the far side of the mausoleum hall, into what looked like a hydroponics lab, but which was almost overgrown and for all intents and purposes seemed more like an indoor jungle. It was humid and warm, just like in a jungle, and the

chamber – in stark contrast with the one they’d just stepped out of – teemed with life! Small trees grew from the banks of hydroponics bays to almost reach the vault-like ceiling of the compartment, and had spread their branches wide. Lush green vines wound between them, obstructing any chance of long range visibility. Light and heat seemed to penetrate from the ceiling. Soil had formed on top of the deck plating, covering it completely in places. Small bird-like creatures covered in bright orange, blue and yellow feathers hanging upside down from the tips of flowing tree branches flapped their wings and chattered excitedly at the sight of the intruders. A furry creature that looked something like a cross between a cat and a large bunny rabbit sat up in the long grass beside a hydroponics bank and looked at Flane with interest.

“*Eep!*” it squeaked at him, blinked, and then quickly bounded away, vanishing into the undergrowth. Insects chirped and buzzed softly in the quiet.

“Well, ‘*eep*’ to you too!” Flane waved after it and grinned at Vic and Killian as they resumed walking through the garden along what was clearly a pathway.

“These plants and animals must be native to this moon.” Vic speculated. “This is probably what kept the crew alive for a while – hydroponics gardening and a little rabbit stew on the side.”

“Sure makes a nice garden!” Flane observed. Rough as it was, the garden held a certain indefinable beauty.

“We should set one up on the *Mercury*, hey Stu?” Vic winked jokingly at him.

“On the *Mercury*?” Stu asked. What an idea! The ship was so small that crewmen of larger ships often joked that battlespringer class ships came equipped with bucket seats! They rounded a bend in the path, and suddenly Vic elbowed Flane and pointed wordlessly towards a row of fruit trees in a hydroponics bank.

“*Look at that!*” Vic Chapman hissed in awe.

There, just a few feet ahead of them, was a girl – a very distinct figure of a young woman of about 20 years with short black hair, wearing a long brown skirt and white blouse – standing with her back towards them.

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