

Chasing Ghosts by Christina Engela

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Foreword

“Chasing Ghosts” gives readers a taste of “Panic! Horror In Space” – a series of sci-fi-horror misadventures in deep space with the crew of the I.S.S. Mercury – which, of all the starships in the elite Terran Space Fleet, 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...

“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?

“Panic! Horror In Space” 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 Sucks Too!” 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”. This story was destined for “Space Sucks Too!” but that wasn't to be!

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 much for “Space Sucks Too!” ... for a while at least!

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 (“Mercury Rising”) 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.

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

Best regards,

Christina Engela

Chasing Ghosts

Imagine, if you will:

Like most ships in the Terran Space Fleet’s elite exploration component known as the Pioneer Fleet, the I.S.S. *Mercury* traversed what was regarded as previously unknown space for the purposes of making it into *known* space.

However, at this particular point in time, after the ship had suffered the embarrassing loss of most of its crew a few weeks previously in a rather weird incident involving a long-lost loderunner ...and *ahem* *zombies*... most of the crewmen aboard the Mercury were new replacements, and with few exceptions – fresh out of the academy! As a matter of interest, only six of the original crew had survived and remained onboard – and the loss of so many crew members under his command was something that Captain Stuart Flane was quite certain he wasn’t going to ever live down!

Flane was also reasonably certain that the hallowed marble hallways of Space Fleet HQ were likely to still be ringing with peals of laughter at the mere mention of his name – and that he would likely be shuffled lower down in the promotion list for it! In fact, he had a suspicion that his name had probably already sunk a lot of notches lower on that promotion list, if not having vanished from it entirely!

After the *zom-er*, incident, the *Mercury* sailed to the nearest Space Fleet outpost, Starbase 43, where they took on the aforementioned replacement crew – and Captain Flane and the five other surviving members of the previous crew endured hours of grilling, debriefing and questioning!

Flane and his executive officer Vic Chapman in particular, later compared the grilling they'd received to an outright interrogation – which stopped just short of them being tied to chairs and worked over by a WWF wannabe by the name of Bruno, or waterboarding. Curiosity and thoroughness on the part of his superiors was quite understandable, Flane supposed – under the circumstance. After all – quite a lot of Space Fleet personnel were now dead, seemingly all shot to pieces by their Captain himself, and his Exo! Each of the surviving crew was made to write out their experiences in old-fashioned paper statements in the isolation of their prison cells in the starbase brig, and the documents handed over to Commodore Peters, the CO of the starbase.

After that, the survivors endured having their minds probed with sophisticated medical equipment to determine whether they were lying or suffering from some form of mental delusion. Finally, more-or-less convinced the survivors were telling the truth – or at least that they believed what they'd put in their statements – Commodore Peters reluctantly called off the mandatory inquiry on the third day. Not that the investigators hadn't anything to go on, but the sensor-logs of the I.S.S. *Mercury* itself, as well as numerous other scanning, recording and sensor devices aboard it, all corroborated their stories. That, and the detail that they showed no signs of having been tampered with.

Then, after a few more days of orientation for the new crew and some repairs, the I.S.S. *Mercury* set off again to resume their mission of exploration in that sector – but that was all the crew, both new and old knew at the face of it! Behind the scenes, after having run the gauntlet of the three day inquiry, Captain Flane had been ordered to appear on the red carpet before the outpost commandant, where he'd taken the brunt of a lecture, a sermon and a stern reprimand!

Commodore Peters, a quite elderly, condescending lady of senior Space Fleet rank, went on quite a bit, during which Flane also hoped – somewhat resentfully, that when he reached the ripe old age of 98, he wouldn't feel compelled to occupy a desk at a lonely Space Fleet outpost because he had no children or grandchildren to go home to, or frankly, nothing better to do! Still, being in his mid-thirties, Flane had no cause for alarm – there was still plenty of time to effect a career change – if that's what he wanted to later on. Meanwhile, after the chewing out he was receiving, he looked forward to settling down again in his command seat on the small bridge of the *Mercury* to a pleasant humdrum routine, charting unexplored bits of this sector of space, fielding reports of interesting comets and strange nebulae doing flick-flacks and giant stars turning inside out for no apparent reason.

“Do we understand each other, Captain?” Peters asked pointedly.

“Hmm?” Flane grunted, coming out of his deep thought like the cork popping out of a bottle.

“Yes, ma'am.”

The Commodore closed the reprimand with a stern, sarcastic warning: “*Be careful with the new crew, Captain! Try not to lose them this time!*”

In all fairness – his fault or not – Flane had lost around 97% of his crew – without having had the foresight to honor the Captain’s tradition of going down with his ship! Not that it was really necessary, since he actually got the *Mercury* back from the *zoms* anyway, and eliminated the threat – which is probably why they hadn’t taken command privileges away from him entirely, like the proverbial keys of the proverbial T-bird, whatever that was. Anyway, regardless of all that, when Flane eventually left the Commodore’s office, feeling decidedly gnawed upon, he also recognized the familiar sensation of a pair of training wheels attached to his boots again, just like when he first graduated from Space Fleet Academy.

Along with his new crew and the stinging, stern reprimand from Commodore Peters, Flane had also been handed a new assignment – one which left him feeling certain that he was already being punished for his misfortune with even more misfortune. The Commodore had ordered him to essentially babysit a group of civilian TV personalities and their film and production crew for a few days. Not just *any* boring old TV personalities mind you – *paranormal investigators* working for the Interstellar Travel Channel!

“Pfff! Paranormal!” He thought skeptically. One look at one of those zoms he and his crew had encountered, and they’d need a change of under-everything!

Commodore Peters hadn’t reacted too kindly to his first words upon hearing what his new assignment was, but then “*What is this, a joke?*” was probably not the most agreeable response he could have given – but alas, what was done, was done.

Not to apply more pressure onto Flane’s already bruised shoulders, but apparently one of the investigators was Peters’ own nephew, and since he was part of a long-running paranormal TV show called “*Spectre Adventures*” that got high ratings around the whole Empire, and once – Flane suspected – she’d applied the spin of “*it will make the Fleet look good*”, Peters found pulling well-lubricated strings at HQ a little easier. The punch-line was that a Space Fleet officer had been requested to participate as a member of the team for a whole episode – and guess whose shoulder her sinewy fingers had rested on? It was, she called the assignment, “*a milk run!*” Her parting words to him were something along the lines of “*don’t fuck this up!*” In fact, all levity aside, they were *exactly* that.

Thus it was that the I.S.S. *Mercury* was again outward-bound, headed toward the part of space where Flane always felt the tightly-knotted fabric of civilization begin to thin out, if not actually fray and completely unravel. It was the place where known and unknown space met – the frontier. This was the Outblack.

Their particular destination on that part of the frontier – which was somewhat extensive, was a deserted mining base on a planet which had a reputation in certain circles – being naturally, the paranormal investigation subculture and fan-base.

When Peters had informed Flane of their intended destination, he’d actually groaned out loud – but fortunately retained enough dignity to keep a straight face, and successfully resisted the urge to give himself a face-palm in front of the Commodore. Deserved or not, Stuart Flane felt he’d

had quite enough of creepy ghost and zombie shit, thanks very much, and would have preferred something more ordinary – like fighting Corsair marauders, facing a firing squad, or something of that nature. He shook his head in frustration, eyes closed, while resting his forehead on two tensed fingers of one hand.

“Are you okay?” His friend and executive officer, Commander Vic Chapman asked from his seat nearby him on the small bridge. “You look a little... peeved.”

“*Peeved?*” Flane snapped. “We just survived that nasty business with the *zoms* – not to mention three days of interrogation – and now ...we’ve got *this* to deal with!”

“Another crazy adventure!” Vic grinned, much to Flane’s chagrin. Of course, *he’d* find the bright side to their predicament! “Off to save the galaxy from the undead and supernatural!”

Stuart Flane didn’t believe in ghosts. Neither did Vic. Neither of them believed in zombies either, but that only made being chased around an abandoned space ship by something neither of them believed existed that much more surreal and frightening. Nor was the detail that they weren’t exactly supernatural in nature much comfort to them while they’d watched the *zoms* chomping down on poor ensigns Pierce and... *Fuckit*.

“You’re far too cheerful today, Vic!” Flane sighed. “I mean, babysitting a bunch of TV stars on a jaunt to an abandoned mining outpost is one thing – but then again, at least *you* weren’t *ordered* by Commodore Peters to participate in their little 12 hour ‘lock-down’ personally!”

Vic giggled naughtily, just as the entire bridge crew paused in their work to turn and observe a tall, slightly muscular male in his early 30’s sporting the latest gelled spiky hairstyle arriving on the bridge. Mak Sagan wore black jeans, a plain black T and a shiny black jacket. He stopped at the entrance as the auto-doors slid shut behind him, and smiled as if waiting for a cue from a director. A dull thud sounded from the closed door, before it opened again a moment later, and another more portly fella dressed similarly, but sporting a short brown beard, side-burns and a red bandana tied over his bald head, entered – rubbing his elbow and grinning sheepishly behind his camera display.

“*C’mon Erin!*” Mak hissed under his breath “*I’m workin’ here!*”

“Sorry!” Erin Goodman blushed. “Door didn’t wanna open for me! Rollin’!”

“Captain Flane!” Mak Sagan smiled at Flane, who winced and closed his eyes as the little floodlight on top of Erin’s camera momentarily blinded him. “How long before we reach Florida-7? We’re really eager to get at those ghosts and demons!”

“If they’re not careful,” Vic told Flane quietly aside, grinning with mounting appreciation for sarcasm, “They’ll get mistaken for Corsairs and that’ll be the end of the show!”

“Oh, don’t I wish!” Flane nodded in reply to Vic before turning his gaze onto the lead paranormal investigator like a heat-seeking thoro-cannon. “Just another five hours, Mr. Sagan! Please be patient – and what did I say about not coming onto my bridge?”

“I don’t recall.” Said Mak Sagan, momentarily taken aback. Nobody had the gall to use that tone of voice at him in a very long time. “What’s a bridge again? On a ship, I mean?”

The brief solitary peal of laughter that came from Sagan echoed around the bridge before dying in a small cough as he noticed nobody else had found that as funny as he did. Erin kept *rollin'*, looking at Mak Sagan via the little camera display panel, completely straight-faced.

“So...er...Did anyone catch the episode where we figured out that spirits *can* cross over running water? That was quite a sticky *sidjuation!* Er. No?” Sagan continued nervously, pointing roundabout with one hand, feeling a little embarrassed. And lost. His gaze returned to Captain Flane.

“I said *don't*. Now get back to your allocated cabin please, Mr. Sagan.” Flane chided. “Go on, off you trot – it’s back that way, the way you came!”

Mak Sagan’s shoulders slumped a little, and without another word – diva-like, he turned round on a penny and stalked off. Sidekick-Erin gave Flane a parting wink and a nod before following his supervisor out the door with a happy little swagger to rejoin the troupe of production crew, make-up and wardrobe artists, effects technicians, producer, director and extras occupying a small cluster of currently vacant crew cabins on deck 4. Flane knew those cabins well enough to know their viewports had an excellent view of the hyperdrive engine’s plasma vents. This compared quite well to, say, a window in a motel room that had an excellent view of a brick wall in an alleyway. Also, the vibrations from the engines in that part of the ship were guaranteed to give them sleepless nights, especially at anything above warp 5. A slow, warm, appreciative grin spread across his face.

“Well, that was fun!” Vic said, smiling. “Another day in the life of the *I.S.S. Mercury!*”

“Indeed it was!” Flane smiled back. “Helm – crewman... *Whats-it...*”

“Gamma, sir.” Said crewman Gamma. She was new to the crew of this ship, and like most of the replacements hadn’t got used to Flane’s penchant for forgetfulness when it came to crew names.

“Gamma.” Flane smiled at the pretty petite blonde sitting at the helm desk. “Please increase speed to maximum.”

“We’re already at warp six, sir!” Gamma replied dutifully, before telling Captain Flane what he already knew. “Maximum safe cruising velocity for this class of ship! We only have limited warp seven use – in case of emergency!”

“I’d say this qualifies as an emergency, crewman!” Vic chortled to the side before adding: “Let’s get this torture over with A.S.A.P. – take us to warp seven!”

Flane and Vic – who were by now veterans of deep-space exploration, had long ago overcome the fear of a starship coming apart at warp 7. After all, when a warp engine went past its safety limits and if, gods forbid, anything went wrong... Not so, the less-experienced crew. Flane had long ago come to terms with the fact that even at warp 1 the ship was being thrust through the fabric of space faster than the speed of light by a semi-controlled quantum-physics nightmare contained by a magnetically generated bottle that could wink out of existence when needed most. Just about the only upside to that outcome was that they would all be killed virtually instantly.

“Aye, sir!” Gamma sighed, almost visibly shrugging before reluctantly easing the throttle control open to warp seven.

Below decks, in one of the cabins allocated to the “Specter Adventures” film crew, the already disturbing vibrations increased markedly and caused a dozing make-up artist to start sliding perceptibly towards the edge of her mattress.

Used to unexplained and unexpected bumps in the night, Neil Gruff – the third member of the *Spectre Adventures* investigative team – bored with nothing to do but wait, simply watched, fascinated, in anticipation. He ignored the expected dull thump on the bare deck plating and turned over and continued to try to sleep. It didn’t work, and not because of the moaning and muttered swearing coming from the space on the floor between the two bunk-beds in the cabin.

Gruff’s thoughts were preoccupied with the events of the past few months. The team’s latest run of paranormal investigations seemed to reveal some kind of pattern – a disturbing pattern. Bad luck seemed to be following them – a thought with which the semi-conscious and swearing make-up artist by the name of Lois Blaine might agree, had he shared it with her. For years now, *things* seemed to have been following them home from the places they investigated: New Alcatraz Penal Facility, an asylum for the incurably insane on Pluto, the abandoned titanium mine on Horus-6, Lulu Penitentiary, and the old Royal Hotel in *Drummond*, Genghis Prime’s capital city. Capturing Electronic Voice Phenomena or E.V.P. – despite being a routine part of their occupation – was a goose-bump-raising business, and when nasty-sounding disembodied voices started growling messages like “*I...hate...Neil...*” or “*Kill...Mak!*” – especially when demonstrating how the tech worked at family gatherings far away from any sites ever investigated by them, his entire skin began to regularly feel like a pincushion!

Although Mak and Neil generally laughed along with everyone else who heard these unexplained threatening voices played back at parties, it had stopped being amusing a long time ago – especially when the unseen owners of those voices threw things at them or pinned them against a wall in their own homes! Lately, and more frighteningly, entities haunting a location they had visited would already know their names and reputations without them ever having been there before – leading to widespread criticism from some of their fan-base! Some para-nerds – as they were calling themselves – were even calling them fakes and frauds because of it, and what’s more, these same things were being said by the exact *same* voices in different locations!

Once, in a surprisingly lengthy E.V.P. recording, a particularly angry spirit had lectured Mak Sagan about such claims as ‘three knocks meant a spirit was mocking the holy trinity’, or that ‘three scratches means the angry spirit is demonic’, his incorrect use of the term ‘warlock’ to mean a male witch, his ‘infantile usage of *lookit* as an actual word’ – and finished by calling him a ‘bloody wanker’, an ‘ignoramus’, and a ‘cuckold’. It was quite an impressive piece of paranormal evidence – unusually verbose, spectacularly clear, and the video of their shocked expressions while listening to it for the second time was *still* trending on Itube despite being taken down by the original poster some years ago.

Aside from the obviously supernatural incidents, other... more real world type bad things had happened to the team in general of late. Erin and his wife had separated a couple of years before, after enduring several years of relationship problems relating to the show. Erin was still onboard because – well, he’d been at this lark of chasing ghosts in the haunted spots around the Terran Empire for so long, it was his life now. Kinda like *him*. Some blamed it on the fame. Others

blamed it on work pressure and being away from home for so long, but Neil knew better than that.

As for the self-proclaimed leader of the troupe, Mak Sagan... Despite his fame and wealth, Mak was still single and lonely. Neil knew Mak's dating life sucked flaccid donkey balls – and that was putting it gently. Not that Mak had a penchant for quadrupeds, but his ego tended to get in the way of interacting with regular people. Mak was a fairly good team leader – but meanwhile back at the ranch, the poor guy buried himself in hair gel, shallow flirtation and the pursuit of yet more fame as a way of dealing with rejection and being alone. So he flirted and tried desperately to seem deeper and more sensitive than he really was to his legions of adoring para-nerd fans – but romantically-speaking, he got rejected time and again. So Mak tried even harder, all the while pretending everything was just fine. “*Developing the brand*” Mak called it.

“*Specter Adventures*” was a huge success. It had been their bread and butter for twelve years, and for the last seven years running the show had received accolades at annual TV series awards and interviews for a plethora of paranormal interest magazines and shows. When Neil was being completely honest with himself, he recognized it had been quite a fun thrill ride – but he still knew it wasn't enough. It had become nothing more than a distraction for all of them from the daily horrors of real life. It was a way for Mak Sagan to forget the terror of being dragged out of bed by the ankles in the middle of every other night and shaken about by invisible forces! And Neil? Well, *Neil*... He couldn't remember the last time he'd had any peaceful sleep either. He was a stoic, but even he had his limits... Something seemed to be following the *Specter Adventures* team around, dogging them like – like, well, a dog. No, more like a predator in the wild, playing a strategy game with its prey...wounding one here, another there, and then retreating into the shadows to watch and wait as they scurried around to defend themselves, all the while gradually wearing them down a little at a time...

Having increased speed, the *Mercury* arrived at its destination a lot sooner than anticipated earlier. The small Terran starship dropped out of hyperspace, decelerated, and looked for a nice parking space in orbit over the abandoned paradise planet called Florida-7. In the engine room, serious-faced entechs cast worried glances at the ship's engine as the heated baffle-plates started to cool and made disconcerting popping noises.

Earth-like, but completely uninhabited, the planet had a predominantly tropical climate, with minor subtropical zones at its poles. This was attributed to the planet's nearness to its sun, which warmed the surface for approximately 56 hours out of each 112 hour day.

Meanwhile in his private cabin – a diva-like insistence of Mak Sagan and the producer of the show – Mr. Sagan sat on his bunk holding a little mobile audio recording device and trying hard to ignore the soft creaking and rustling noises coming from his personal parcels and baggage stowed under the bunk. They could've been a result of the vibrations of the deck-plating during the trip earlier... but the ship was in orbit now, and quiet. The vibrations had gone, and in its place, the silence – interrupted by those infernal rustling sounds. He'd looked before, and found no cause. He put aside his trepidation. He had better things to do, such as making dramatic annotations for later use in the final recording of the show.

“Floridia Seven.” He said to the recorder, “A promising paradise planet settled by two thousand miners, artisans and administrators over 40 years ago – suddenly abandoned for no apparent reason! What drove the people who came here in search of adventure and wealth in a highly profitable selenium mine to suddenly just walk away from it all? Was it abuse of power by the administrators? Was it the high accidental death rate? Is the Prosperity Selenium Mine on Floridia Seven haunted? That’s what the *Specter Adventures* investigative team – myself Mak Sagan, Neil Gruff and Erin Goodman plan to find out!”

Sighing with the trepidation of a man who knew he was *never* alone, Mak Sagan pressed the replay button. “...*suddenly abandoned for no reason...*” Fast forward “...*in search of adventure and wealth...*” He stopped it, stepped it back and replayed a piece slightly slowed down with the volume raised. “...*suddenly* ^{hahahahaha} *abandoned for no reason...*”

The sound of the chilling unexplained E.V.P. laughter superimposed over his own voice in the recording would have to be screened out by the tech crew later at the studio. Swallowing nervously, Mak Sagan pressed play again. “...*in search of adventure* ^{I’m waiting for you!} *and wealth...*” He replayed the last segment again, then ran trembling fingers through the same gelled hairdo he told everybody on set never to touch. Despite there being no more vibrations since the engines had shut off, something was still softly rustling in the bags under his bunk. He swallowed nervously again. This was going to be like Summer Gardens Asylum on Pluto all over again.

In a parking orbit above the planet Floridian-7, the *Mercury* prepared to send down the landing party consisting of on-site production crew from the Interstellar Travel Channel, including Sagan, Gruff and Goodman and a technician. In the transmatter chamber, a bleary-eyed, sleep-deprived make-up technician was putting finishing touches to Mak Sagan’s hair and skin-tone before getting shooed away by a tense-looking middle-aged director-producer wearing jeans, boots – and for some reason, a cowboy hat. There wasn’t really a schedule, since this trip wasn’t costing the company anything over or above the regular salaries – thanks to the free use of the Space Fleet’s finest – and feeling creeped out on set was something of an occupational hazard, but the director-producer often longed for the simple, happy days when he used to shoot XXX videos for the interweb, usually for the XXXWeb or IFAP.com. At least back then he didn’t feel like the hackles at the back of his neck were getting buff from all the working out.

Standing on the transmatter jump platform with the rest of the landing party, with a stack of equipment in black plastic crates at the center, Captain Stuart Flane longed for this little social experiment to be over. He didn’t believe in ghosts. He didn’t believe in *zoms* either – and even the ones that chased him and Vic around the inside of the old loderunner *Kilgary* turned out to be technological in nature, operated by alien nano-bots. He didn’t believe in the concept of the supernatural as a whole – except where it wasn’t entirely natural to hop in a starship, travel faster than the speed of light, and visit other worlds. It was understandable that to people who lived on under-developed worlds, even a loser like Flane might seem god-like, even if only a little. To Flane, when people died, they were gone – and they left their corpses behind for posterity like vacant snail shells in the surf for kids to play with.

A less visible face in the show, a younger guy by the name of Michael Marley, a.k.a. ‘Milly’ who usually operated as their co-ordinator and spotter from a remote control desk behind a PC, smiled and nodded shyly in greeting at Flane, who noticed the high black Mohawk and silver piercings he was wearing.

“Captain Flane!” Mak Sagan called, distracting Flane and moving up beside him on the platform, with a small HD multi-planar full-spectrum camera in hand. “Just to be sure, if we need to debunk anything we see or hear or experience down on the surface, could you please confirm there’s nobody living on Florida-7?”

“Sure.” Said Flane, nodding.

“Well?” Sagan prompted after a pregnant pause.

“Well what?”

“Er.” Sagan blinked. “Would you like to give us some detail? How did you do that, exactly?”

“We ran a sensor-sweep of the planet and the mining facility twenty minutes ago.” Flane stated matter-of-factly, mildly annoyed by Neil Gruff and Erin Goodman, who were circling the platform with their camera’s up and pointed directly at him. “The facility is uninhabited, and has been for at least ten years. There are no traces of any ships having landed anywhere on the planet in at least six months. We only detected base animal life, such as insects, small mammals, birds and the like. Aside from us, there are no ships in the area.”

“So it’s safe to go down there?”

“Oh, absolutely.”

“What about energy sources?”

“The power core of the reactor at the center of the facility was taken off line when the facility was decommissioned. There isn’t any.”

“No electricity at all?”

“None that we were able to detect.” Said Flane bluntly, wishing he’d remembered to bring a hipflask along – which he felt might have contained the only spirits he would encounter on this trip. Or so he hoped. At least he had his standard side-arm in his belt holster, for comfort. The producer – Mr. Cowboyhat there – had informed him that a sonic-pulse rifle he wanted to take with was a little over the top for a ‘family show’, and he’d reluctantly handed it back to a smirking Vic.

Seeing his expression for what it was, Vic Chapman gave him a sarcastic grin and a thumbs-up. Flane rolled his eyes in response and Vic, still grinning, retreated behind Gruff and Goodman.

“Okay, well, we’re ready!” Said Sagan feigning eagerness, motioning at Gruff and Goodman to mount the platform. “Shall we go?”

Flane waved at the crewman on duty at the operator’s desk, giving him the signal to dematerialize the party and send them to the surface. It was a beautiful, warm sunny early evening outside the deserted mining facility. A vast forest of palm trees stood motionless at the edge of the clearing, stretching into the distance all around them, with hardly a breath of wind to move them. Long unkempt green grass – the remains of what seemed to have once been neat, manicured lawns gone wild – surrounded the expanse of cracked and crumbling tar surface they were now standing on. The sky had a deep orange tint to it at the edge of sunset. The rest of it above them was still a clear, spectacular blue, brighter and lighter further behind them, blending into darker tones at the orange rim near the horizon they were looking at. Flane had an idea that

the approaching sunset here would take at least twice as long in coming as a familiar Terran sunset, and tipped the pair of multipurpose eyeglasses resting on top of his head forward so they landed in place in front of his eyes. The lenses tinted automatically to reduce the level of bright light passing through them. It seemed so peaceful, so idyllic. The only thing missing was the ocean, the sound of seagulls and kids burying each other in the sand.

“Moments later,” Sagan narrated aloud into his camera audio pick-up, ruining the moment completely for Flane, “we arrived on the surface of Florida-7, in what appears to be a parking lot covered with small sand-dunes and overgrown with weeds. Behind us, the administration building...”

Feeling like he was being prompted to look at it, Flane turned around at the same time as the other crew members, to visually examine a crumbling two-story red brick office block. Rows of broken windows yawned darkly in the walls, the bits of glass that remained in their frames were reminiscent of teeth – and the ones above looked especially sinister.

“...the administration building of the abandoned selenium mining complex,” Sagan continued, “originally opened by the Prosperity Mining Company over forty years ago. Linked to the other buildings in the complex by enclosed corridors in the shape of a wagon-wheel, this one promises to make us feel like rats in a maze...”

Rolling his eyes at the unnecessary dramatization, Flane distracted himself by looking around. Something at his feet caught his eye. He bent down to pick it up, his fingers turning the small brightly colored object over and over.

“...A *child's toy*! Our guest investigator on tonight's show, Captain Stuart Flane of the starship *Mercury* – the ship that brought us here – has found a – *lookit* – what is this, Neil?” Sagan said aloud, still narrating, sidling up to Flane and pointing his camera in his face and then at the object in his hands, violating Flane's personal space. “It's a *flazo*!” Said Neil Gruff, filming from a whole two feet away.

“*Duuuude!*” Erin Goodman exclaimed enthusiastically from behind his camera, covering another angle of the momentous discovery. “Findin' kid's toys in places like this is creepy *coooool!*” “Bravo! Absolutely terrifying!” Said Flane brimming with sarcasm and suppressing the urge to take a couple of steps back – or to shove Mak Sagan away from him. Or even, just out of spite, to muss up his hairdo. He tossed the dusty, faded little plastic disc to Sagan instead, who caught it and examined it under his camera.

“Sometimes...” Sagan narrated, “We tend to forget that while we're here chasing ghosts and hunting specters, that *people* actually lived here, and that they brought their *families* with them! Children played and grew up here, they went to school here! And died here! Might there be the spirits of children lurking in the dark passages of this abandoned complex? Cold and alone? This is what we're here to find out!”

Flane didn't like the look of the administration building one bit. Sure, being a skeptic meant he didn't believe in ghosts and spirits – at least not of the sort that didn't come in bottles – he quite enjoyed those! He was a skeptic, not a teetotaler – it didn't mean he didn't feel uncomfortable

around ruins and creepy old buildings that seemed to ooze everything he was skeptical about from every broken window or dark, open doorway! Walls, floors and ceilings might collapse on them, there could be a million different ways to die, exploring that old ruin! He felt he might need a tetanus shot just looking at it!

Flane, Sagan, Gruff and Goodman began walking along the overgrown pathway from the parking lot that led to the main entrance of the building, followed at a bit of a distance by a grunting Milly Marley who was pulling the trolley-jack loaded with the equipment crates behind him, solo.

Built in a neo-colonial style popular on many extrasolar colonies, the old administration building had wood and glass doors and window frames. The idea was to give residents on outposts and colonies far from Earth a sense of warmth, continuity, permanence, and familiarity – more so than they might get from working in a building that just looked like it had fallen out of a shake-and-bake concrete mold.

Just as they neared the front entrance of the old building, a loud bang was heard, which seemed to have come from the lower row of windows to the right side of the entrance portico.

“Whoa!” Flane breathed, taken mildly by surprise and resisting the urge to draw his blaster.

“What the heck was that?”

“Wow!” Sagan and Gruff exclaimed. “*Did you hear that?*”

“We just heard a loud crash!” Mak Sagan said into his camera’s audio sensor. “What sounded like a heavy object being knocked over or being thrown? Before our investigation even began, things started happening! Let’s check it out!”

“Something tells me this is going to be a very *active* investigation!” Neil Gruff grinned into Mak Sagan’s camera. As the three sleuths literally dropped everything on the spot and hurried towards the windows, Flane and Milly Marley stared after them, Flane drawing mental comparisons between paranormal investigators and bomb technicians. Whenever there was a loud bang, both or either seemed to rush towards the source of the incident to find out what caused it, instead of in the opposite direction! Sighing, and betting he would regret this later on, Stuart Flane reluctantly followed. By the time he caught up with them, they were already leaning through the broken window frames into the rooms beyond, pointing this way and that, and looking for signs of what caused the loud noise. Erin Goodman, feeling braver than the others for the moment, climbed through one window and began poking around, still *rollin’* with his camera.

“Here!” Erin cried, pointing at a large metal filing cabinet that seemed a little out of place leaning on one of its lower corners and against the far wall of the small chaotic office, and looking slightly deformed. The drawers had burst and slid out, and some old paper files had fallen to the floor. They looked clean and fresh and uncovered by dust, so it was obvious they hadn’t lain there long.

Mak Sagan and Neil Gruff entered the room through the same window, followed reluctantly by Flane. Sagan pointed out the scratches and scrape marks on the dusty floor tiles that looked very fresh too, leading back to the far corner of the room where the cabinet must have stood before!

Flane was puzzled by the noise. After all, there were no sentient life forms on the planet, aside from him and – well, ...okay, just *him*. He could tell from the available evidence that it was the filing cabinet that had made the noise when it slid across the tiled floor and smashed into the wall – but he was pretty damn sure it hadn't done that by itself! Had these numb-nuts got a ship of accomplices to set this place up with animatronics, holograms and digital tripwires ahead of their arrival here? *'Naaaaah!'* He thought skeptical of his own suspicions. Surely not? As skeptical as Flane was, he dismissed the notion entirely. It just wasn't feasible.

While Neil Gruff searched the area with a small device that looked like a TV remote to try and find any EM spikes, Sagan tried to pick up E.V.P's by issuing provocative challenges at an empty room. Flane wasn't a believer, but he was sure that calling an invisible entity that could throw a 200 kilogram steel filing cabinet across a room a 'rambunctious duck tit' was probably looking for trouble.

Then, out of the blue, the three began a chorus of "*Whoa! Did you feel that?*" and "*Duuuuude!*" and started what Flane thought was a bizarre male bonding ritual of comparing their bare forearms to see who had the biggest goose bumps. Flane meanwhile, put his own gooseflesh down to the influence of suggestion, groupthink or mass hypnosis, and surreptitiously pulled out his portascanner and pointed the pocket-sized standard issue Space Fleet scanning device at them, then round the room – and back at them again. *Nothing unusual. Not a thing. Hmm.* The filing cabinet though did show signs of having moved less than five minutes previously – and with considerable force! He wondered how they'd pulled that off. A force-field generator perhaps? One cunningly hidden in the wall behind the cabinet would've blown it clear across the room without too much trouble. Of course, that would leave tell-tale luminous stains around the generator – and serious cracks in the plaster – and he couldn't see either of those anywhere in the room!

After a few more minutes of nothing happening, the quartet exited back through the same window and went to collect their equipment where they left it – and Milly Marley, who'd sat down on one of the boxes on the trolley and was playing a game console – before heading round to the front entrance. It looked like the architects and decorators had succeeded in realizing their vision – except for the warmth. The building was decidedly chilly inside, Flane thought, as the crew casually explored the entrance and lobby. The battered wooden doors slowly squeaked shut behind them on their rusty hinges. Flane found it strange that a place which people had supposedly simply left and walked out of had become so... abused and... damaged. Not a window pane seemed to have remained intact, not even in the front doors.

So much paint had peeled from the cement walls it seemed they were growing a fur coat. Dust, leaves, paint flakes and bits of debris covered the tiled floor, which was also littered with bits of broken chairs, desks and glass from the windows. Graffiti marked the walls of the lobby, in red and black spray paint. Considering the entire outpost – the small town nearby and the whole mining complex had been completely evacuated over a decade previously and securely locked up, the planet deserted – Flane was surprised to find he might have been the only one present wondering *how* the windows had all been broken? Who had done the graffiti on the walls? Had it happened before the last ship left the colony – or had ships stopped by just to have a look around and leave "*Keptin Vortex woz 'ere'*" scrawled on the back of the privy door? He had a hard time

deciding who would come all this way, to the outer edge of the frontier in this sector, to throw rocks at the windows – or to paint messages like “*HELP*” and “*GET OUT*” on the walls. An incomplete “HEL” with a funny elongated squiggle that might have been a start to a “P” ran out along the wall and then up, halfway across the ceiling, as though the graffiti artist had been suddenly dragged sideways in mid-stroke – which gave even Flane’s skepticism a twinge of discomfort.

“Now that’s just downright unsettling.” He muttered under his breath, following the paint trail with his eyes to the point it disappeared in the direction of the main corridor where it met the back of the lobby.

Sagan and Gruff had decided that the hub at the center of the surface complex was the best place to set up a control center, so down the main corridor they went, with Flane and Marley and Erin trailing behind. The corridor was well-illuminated by a vault-like transparent plastic roof that let the light in, only it was getting close to night now, and that light was fading. There was no electricity in the complex, and quite by chance Flane noticed that there seemed to be very few unbroken light fittings left around the place anyway. Everything fragile that could be smashed, bent or broken appeared to have already been. Decay was everywhere. Even the upholstery on furnishings that should’ve been sheltered inside the building appeared to have been rotting away. A thick layer of dust and a myriad of small objects lay everywhere, mixed with bits of glass, slivers of plastic, splinters of wood, small stones that could’ve been fragments of concrete... And everywhere they went so far, the only sounds they heard were their own – breathing, footsteps and the rustle of their clothing as they moved. Otherwise it was completely and utterly still. It was eerie.

With the last daylight quickly fading, the party of investigators reached the hub, which was basically an octagonal-shaped junction where corridors from other buildings in the complex all met up in the center. Flane turned round slowly and silently read the labels above each entranceway. ADMINISTRATION was the one they had just arrived by. MEDICAL was the next one to his left, then TECHNICAL, LOGISTICS, MINE, PROCESSING, and lastly SECURITY.

“Let’s put a little light on the subject!” Neil Gruff said to Flane, giving him a friendly smile, producing a portable camping lantern and put it on the dirt covered tile floor. Once the equipment had been laid out on top of a couple of camping folding tables, Sagan pulled out a table-top holographic schematic of the complex, detailing the layout of the buildings, together with a brief run-down of paranormal hot spots mentioned in interviews they conducted with former residents prior to coming out here. Three laptop computers were set up on a table, the makings of a control center, ready to receive input from whatever cameras and other detection devices the team connected to them. Milly Marley, their control desk operator winked at Flane confidently and settled down behind the center computer and proceeded to position all three so he could reach them all comfortably. Stuart Flane observed detachedly from a discreet distance, hoping to not get in the way, or even worse – more involved. One of the screens showed him that a static camera had been set up at a right angle to them to show Milly and himself watching Milly and himself watching Milly and himself. Bored, he pulled up a folding chair and sat on it, using his portascanner to read their immediate environment. The small pocket-size scanning device was standard issue for Space Fleet away team members, and gave him a readout of the air

content, pressure, density, radiation, electromagnetic fields, gravity variance, temperature fluctuations in the area – and nothing at all out of the ordinary. Right about then Flane longed for a double-chocolate coffee in his special big mug back on the Mercury – the one with the picture of his favorite cartoon cat on it. But there would be none of that for the next twelve hours or so...

“Okay!” Said Sagan narrating again, and performing in front of Erin’s camera. “We have 12 static full-spectrum cameras with built-in E.V.P. recorders, electromagnetic sensors which we will be placing at various locations around the complex! One each at the far ends of these corridors – just in case we get to see any unexplained movements, F.B.A.’s – that’s ‘*full body apparitions*’ in case anyone is wondering! In addition to that, we’ll place motion sensor-alarms and E.M. detectors close to these cameras in case any entities here pass close by or get curious about these devices and are drawn to them! The three of us – Neil, Erin and myself will also be wearing night vision glasses to allow us to see in the dark, and we’ll also be carrying our full-spectrum video recorders and action-cams on our shoulder packs!

We’ll also be investigating some of the hot spots pointed out to us by the people who were stationed here many years ago who we interviewed – the security section, where one or more of the cells in the detention block is said to be haunted, the administration section where a ghost is said to be heard eating pudding in the cafeteria around midnight, and the maintenance department in the technical section, where a guy is said to have died after accidentally tragically falling backwards down an open elevator shaft while demonstrating an archaic dance move called ‘the moon walk’ – and of course, the morgue, where as usual, Neil will get locked in an old freezer for an hour to commune with any dead spirits that might be lingering there... I’ll start with the maintenance section – Erin, I want you to head over to the cafeteria... all alone!”

“As usual!” A not too enthusiastic Erin grinned, shrugging from behind his camera.

“If anything happens, just holler and we’ll come check on you...eventually.” Mak continued.

“Captain Flane – through the whole of this, your post will be right here at the control desk helping Milly to spot for us, okay?”

“Sure, sure.” Flane nodded, relieved he wouldn’t have to traipse through this maze in the dark, even with the aid of his more powerful military-specification night-vision glasses.

“Specter Hunters...” Sagan said, lowering his voice dramatically for the camera. “*Are you ready?*”

Stuart Flane didn’t believe in ghosts or the paranormal, but at this point – surrounded by the excited, tense and nervous “Specter Adventures” crew, dark, shadowy corridors, decay and peeling paint and a sense of dread – he wasn’t so sure of his case just then... and the night was still young.

Read Panic! Horror In Space, starting with “Static”!

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Thanks!

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About the Author



Christina Engela is one of South Africa's most unique and skilled storytellers, having written 13 novellas in three science fiction series, and also several non-fiction titles. Best known for her realistic characterization and for casting fully-fleshed-out LGBT characters in leading roles, Christina brings her wealth of personal experience to each of her stories. With several new offerings already in the pipeline, including several standalone titles, 2020 is bound to be a busy year for her fans!

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