

A PANIC! HORROR IN SPACE PREVIEW

MERCURY RING



CHRISTINA ENGELA



Mercury Rising by Christina Engela

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First Edition

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Introduction by Christina Engela

“Mercury Rising”, while being a whole story in its own right, is really also a preview of “Static”, the first title in the “Panic! Horror In Space” series. “Static” consists of four parts, and “Mercury Rising” is the very first of them – but perhaps, since this is a preview – I should tell you a little more about the series it heralds:

“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 (“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.

“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 of “Static”: 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 portascan 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 portascan 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 portascan.

“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 pin-point 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 fingers encased inside the environment suit glove closed around it and brought it out to look at.

“That’s weird!” Clay breathed, puzzling out the small object lying in his glove palm.

“What is it?” A voice asked just behind him. It was the ensign Flane had thought of as *Fuckit*, whose name was really Hilton Miller.

“When did this ship disappear again?”

“I dunno.” The other replied, his eyes still sweeping their dark, eerie surroundings. “Commander Chapman said forty... forty-something. Why?”

“*This* look forty-something years old to you?” Clay said, offering the object to Miller, who took it and turned it over and over in his hands. It was a small flat plastic disc with colorful images on it that moved slightly.

“It’s a *Flazo!*” Miller breathed, unsure what to think. “You get them inside candy bar wrappers! Kids collect them! So what?”

“Check the date.”

“Five years ago!” Miller groaned. “Shit!”

“Relax!” Clay grinned at his slightly younger fellow ensign, and reached back inside the access hatch. “Plenty of ways to explain that!”

“Yeah, I’ll bet!” Miller replied unconvinced. “Some ship came along this way five years ago and found this wreck and didn’t haul it away as salvage?”

“Yeah!” Clay agreed sarcastically. “Why not? Probably plenty of ships have come past this thing already. Anyway, who’s to say the ship really got lost forty years ago, hey? Could’ve just dropped off the radar and got in trouble five years ago?”

“Whatever, dude – just start the damn engine!” Miller retorted nervously. “I’m sick of the dark!”

“Whatever you say, boss!” Clay grinned. Taking a deep breath, he cautiously pulled at the lever, and then as it moved, pushed it over to the “ON” position. For a few awkward moments, nothing happened. And then he realized he’d forgotten something!

“Shit!” He cursed, closing the access hatch again.

“What?” Miller asked with mounting anxiety. “*What?*”

“Nuthin!” Clay grinned. “Just forgot the layout of these old loderunner engines!”

On the control panel, beside the hatch, Clay found the big red push-button marked “START”, and gingerly, pushed it. The button lit up bright red, and suddenly the ship began to vibrate around them – faintly at first, and then harder. Lights flickered on and off in the high ceiling of the engine room, the flashes of dim blue light glinting off the dull gray metal casings and plastic consoles. Then the lights came on in full force, bright, blinding. Darkness retreated. Miller sighed a relief inside his helmet. Clay, unwilling to admit it to anyone but himself, did the same. Carefully holding the diminutive curiosity that was the *Flazo* in his gloved left hand, he opened a storage pouch at his belt and carefully placed it inside. He would like to satisfy his curiosity about that later.

Meanwhile, on the bridge of the *Kilgary*, Captain Stuart Flane and Commander Vic Chapman had resumed searching for the ship’s log in the databanks of the main computer – which took a wee bit long to boot up for their liking. The bridge may have been well-lit now the power had been restored, but with the bodies lying there on the deck plate, looking like bacon on a skillet, it was no less creepy than before. Just creepy in bright mode.

“Aha!” Vic exclaimed, grinning as the light from the computer console display lit up his face, reflecting green characters off his helmet face-plate. “Got it!”

“Try the last one!” Flane said. “Oh-seven-four-four!”

“Just about forty-three years ago!” Vic confirmed, hitting ‘enter’. “Give or take!”

Another screen on the same desk lit up, showing a middle-aged-looking man – presumably the skipper – sitting in the skipper’s chair a few feet behind them. He seemed tired, tense – nervous.

“Kilgary log, Tuesday – I think!” He choked, running the fingers of one hand through his hair. “This far out, no chance! Tried everything I could! How could I have known? We didn’t stand a chance! Company’s gonna be pissed!” The skipper chuckled, in a fashion that hinted at underlying hysteria. “Ah, well – fuck it! Gonna head to my cabin to wait it out! Hope I can make it there! I’m done – oh, and if anyone finds this thing, please give a big FUCK YOU to my ex-wife!” Then his tone became suddenly remorseful. “All alone now. Nobody left here now but me...”

The video recording stopped at the end, and faded to black.

“Try the one before that.” Flane said. Vic obliged. The same guy appeared in the same seat, looking a lot more relaxed and in control. The time index showed that it was about 12 hours before the previous recording.

“Kilgary log, Monday, nineteen-hundred.” He said tersely. “Repairs completed, engineer Weiss reports everything in order. All systems green, have resumed course to Andronicus.”

“Boring.” Said Vic, chuckling. “Compared to the other entry anyway.”

“Go back one more.” Flane said. “He mentioned repairs. Repairs to *what*? What happened? See if we can find out!”

The video entry before that came up, showing the same figure again, this time looking if nothing else, a little bored.

“Kilgary log, Monday er – oh-seven thirty. Weiss reports extensive damage to the ventral hull plating at section ‘F’, probably a result of the impact with object unknown, probably a meteorite – fuck knows what it was, this part of space is full of floating debris! Anyway, Weiss says he’ll have us ship-shape in a couple of hours, tops!”

“This is weird.” Flane said as that log entry video ended. “A meteorite strikes the ship, they effect repairs...”

“They resume course to Andronicus – having left Tegra a few days before!” Vic added.

“But Tegra and Andronicus are a long way from here!” Flane noted.

“Well, 43 years is a long time to drift...” Vic pondered. “But *this* far? I don’t think so.”

“And that’s not all!” Flane continued. “Twelve hours later, the skipper loses his shit, acts all crazy in his log entry – and says everyone aboard is dead!”

Flane and Vic suddenly arrived at the same conclusion, and made eye contact.

“Medical log!” They said in unison.

“Can you get it from here?” Flane asked.

“I’m looking! I’m looking!” Vic said, clicking a few buttons, moving a cursor this way and that through the antiquated GUI on the screen, causing the display to change quite rapidly between content.

“Nope.” Vic said a few moments later, shaking his head. “Nothing over the same time period at all... Last medical entry was over a week before the bridge logs we saw. Wait, let me try something else...”

Click. Click. Click-click.

“Hello.” Said Vic at last. “That’s interesting.”

“What?”

“A deleted entry – right after the last one.”

“Can you recover it?”

“I’m already on it!” Vic said, and set to work on retrieving the deleted file in the medical log.

Some distance away, near the lower decks of the *Kilgary* near the stern, ensign Pierce and the ensign Flane had referred to as *Damn* were exploring the network of gray corridors in that part of the ship. The lights had come on, making the going a bit easier – and a lot less spooky. For ensigns Pierce and Berry, stepping over the occasional body had been the highlight of this trip so far. Perhaps more so for Pierce – it was creepy, and Pierce was something of a horror junkie. Even so, this wasn’t a horror flick or graphic novel – it was real life, and perhaps a little too close to home. And how about those scans? No cause of death? Seriously?

Pierce stepped over a body lying at a turning in the corridor, Berry following up close behind, holding his portascanner, but not doing much with it.

“Air density’s picking up!” Pierce said, noticing the readout on the small HUD inside his helmet. “Pity we can’t take our helmets off – getting sick of mine!”

“Uhuh.” Berry murmured, not entirely in agreement with his colleague – he felt a little safer inside his. His hand periodically brushing against the bulk of the standard issue blaster in a holster at his right side also helped to reassure him.

The short corridor they had turned into ended in a closed doorway. Since the power had come back on, most systems appeared to be operating again. A little red light glowed brightly on the key pad to the left of the doorway.

“Hmm.” Pierce said. “Wonder what’s in there?”

“Uhuh.” Berry said again, falling a little further behind his companion as they went up to it. Pierce pressed the button below the red light. The door made a humming sound, as if stuck, and then suddenly slid open to the right. A wall of murky green fluid behind it became a deluge – a sloshing, slick flood! The room had been flooded with some kind of liquid – it wasn’t water, it was too slick for that, and too thick!

“Engine-core coolant!” Pierce yelled over the com-link above Berry’s screaming as they were knocked over and swept down the corridor, rolling along the bulkheads and deck plating. Unseen objects caught in the flow of the deluge bumped into him as he rolled, thinking it was Berry. But ensign Berry saw other things in the tumultuous splashing deluge too – faces!

By the time the flood of liquid coolant had petered out and was little more than a wet layer forming puddles of slimy green liquid on the deck, a floundering Pierce was on his hands and knees where he’d landed, and slowly flopped onto his back, panting inside his environment suit.

“Berry!” He called over his helmet com. “Berry! You okay?”

“Get it off me!” Came Berry’s anxious reply. “Get it off me!”

Pierce sat up to find his companion. Berry was lying on his back about ten meters behind him, about another ten meters away from the now open door. There were a number of bodies lying around them too, covered in green slime – and one of them was lying over Berry – who judging from his tone, was on the verge of freaking out! As a matter of fact, as Pierce got to his feet – almost slipping and sliding into the bulkhead, he could see Berry’s wide eyes staring at him past the corpse’s head, which happened to be lying on his chest!

“Get it off me!” Berry cried, his gloves slick with goo slipping and sliding ineffectually as they clawed at the dead weight pinning him down. “*Jesus! Get it fucking off me!*”

Finally reaching his panicking colleague, Pierce grabbed at the grisly corpse, which appeared to be partially preserved by the coolant – but also partly softened to the point where as he grabbed at it, the skin and some bits of flesh came loose and dropped to the deck with soft little ‘plop’ sounds.

“Relax, buddy!” Pierce tried to calm his team-mate as he heaved the ghastly cadaver by the neck and one arm. “Everything’s cool! It’s just another body – we’ve seen plenty today, okay? I’m here, lemme help you!”

Berry pushed it away from underneath until he was able to wriggle free enthusiastically as quickly as he could. Then, seeing Berry was loose, Pierce let the heavy object drop to the deck, the silence broken only with their panting on the com-link. Pierce offered Berry a hand up. Berry took it and, almost sliding and falling over, Pierce helped him up and the two began to take stock of the sight of seven more dead bodies.

“Shit!” Berry swore, sweeping the deck around them with his eyes. “Lost my scanner! And my blaster! *Shit!*”

“Mine’s gone too.” Pierce observed, not exactly ignoring him. “These bodies look a little different to the others, y’see that?”

“Really?” Berry remarked with biting sarcasm. “I hadn’t noticed!”

“No, I’m being serious!” Pierce said, pointing at the nearest one. “Their uniforms are different – not the same as the others!”

“Oh yeah. I see it.” Said Berry, recovering from his ordeal. “Must be from a different ship... Must’ve found it and come to check it out...”

“Yeah...” Said Pierce, suddenly uncomfortable with where that line of thought seemed to be leading. “Kinda like us right now, right?”

“Yeah...” Said Berry vaguely, as though distracted. He wandered over to another corpse lying a few feet away, and rolled it over slightly. “Look at this!”

Pierce went over to see what Berry was pointing at.

“See that? What is it?”

Pierce stared. It looked like a bite! Not a kitsch stage make-up bite that resembled a hiki, or a movie vampire bite with a couple of cute little fang holes... this was a gaping maw in the flesh of the neck, with little indentations around the edges that looked like they were made by teeth! There were more visible in other parts of the same body – the abdomen, the forearm – that one went right down to the bone!

“Our exit cue!” Pierce breathed tensely. “That’s what it is! Let’s move!”

“I’m right with you, brother!” Berry whispered. “Let’s get the hell out of here!”

Meanwhile, on the bridge of the *Kilgary*, Commander Vic Chapman started playback of the newly recovered medical log entry video. A very frightened looking man wearing the now familiar beige-brown company uniform came into view in what looked like it could be the loderunner’s small sickbay.

“Listen, whoever you are... I don’t care who you are, or who you think you are, or where you’re from, or if you’re even Human!” The man said in a tense, earnest voice, “Whatever you think you came onto this ship to do, *stop right now – and go the hell back where you came from!*” He paused to look over his shoulder as if afraid he were being watched. “Shit has gone really tits-up on this tub! Something happened a couple days ago – we hit a meteor, something got on board – unknown agent – chemical, biological – hell, it could even be technological – I don’t know! It’s done something to the crew... something terrible! They’ve started... *doing* things – terrible things!” A sudden, drawn-out, shrill, horrific scream came from somewhere off-screen, followed by loud muffled hammering, and the man quickly glanced round again, and then turned his attention back to the recording device, and whispered. “This ship must not reach anywhere! Least of all Earth, or a colony – a ship, any place where it could spread to! If you can, do what I’ve failed to do – *destroy this ship! You must! Please!*”

Rough, guttural noises came from somewhere else in the room, and a dragging sound. The anonymous man turned “No! *No!*” He protested, then shouted: “Get away from me! *Get away!*” In the split second before the screen went black, above the man’s screaming, Flane and Vic could swear they heard what sounded like growling. A guttural, low growling in the background. They exchanged puzzled glances.

“So what d’you think, Captain?” Vic asked. “Personally, I’m with *that* guy on this one!”

“Come on, Vic!” Flane retorted. “Don’t tell me all this B-grade sci-fi horror-flick decor has scared the willies into you?”

“No, really Stu!” Vic continued. “I mean it – take a look around – there are dead bodies all over the place between *here* and where we arrived an hour ago! None of this shit makes any sense! Shit must really have got seriously fucked up here – as serious as dead bodies between *here* and where we started!”

“You realize how that sounds, Vic?” Flane smiled. “Crazy. Imagine what kinda report I’d have to write? *Spotted abandoned ship identified as missing loderunner Kilgary, lost for 43 years – went to look around, saw too many dead bodies, got scared and went home!*’ For fuck sakes, we’ve got a job to do, a responsibility!”

“Don’t lecture me about ‘the job’, Stu!” Vic Chapman protested. “Or about the responsibility – I know all about that! Okay – let’s leave a marker buoy and give this little adventure a grandiose entry in your own log – but let’s get out now and put this thing to our stern and get the hell out before something *does* happen!”

In the still pause that followed, while thoughts of all his available options circled a drain in his mind, Flane weighed the risks – the lives of the team that was with him, the risk of a potential contaminant that could not be detected by conventional means – and the risk of that contamination spreading – and of course, the number of corpses they had stepped around and over that day.

If there was such a contaminant, wouldn’t going back to the Mercury endanger the ship as well? Flane found himself admitting he didn’t like that idea much either. But nothing – and certainly nothing as worrisome as Vic seemed to fear – had happened as yet. Flane had been round the proverbial block a few times, and knew that didn’t mean nothing could or would happen.

“Yeah, Vic. Okay.” Flane nodded, just as his helmet com-link began to beep from an incoming message. “I agree. Let’s get them out of here – Captain Flane here, go ahead!”

“Ensign Pierce here, sir!” Pierce’s tense voice sounded in his earpiece. “Berry’s with me, we’re okay!”

“Did something happen?” Flane asked, and Vic picked up on the note of concern he heard in his voice.

“Yes, sir! Something did – we opened a door down here in the engine room. The machine room was flooded with engine coolant – that dirty green shit they used to use in these old hyperdrives?”

“Yes, I know it – and then?”

“Room was full up – was like a tsunami – washed us down the corridor like we were two turds sailin’ down the crapper! Anyways, there were more bodies inside – about seven, and they came out with the coolant! Anyways, I thought you should know – they’re not the same, sir!”

“Not the same? What do you mean?”

“Same as the Kilgary’s crew – they’re wearing different uniforms, sir! I think they came from another ship!”

Vic and Flane exchanged glances.

“I see.” Flane continued. “Anything else?”

“They all seem to have wounds on them, sir! Looks like someone or something bit chunks outta them!”

“Thanks for the update, uh...”

“Pierce, sir!” Pierce prompted.

“...Pierce!” Flane nodded. “Okay – meet at the transmatter pick-up point. Time we left!”

By the time Flane ended the call, Vic had already got off the chair at the console and looked like he was ready to go, waiting for him. Vic had even packed away his scanner, which hinted to Flane that he’d had enough and was as ready to go as *he* was.

“Vic, contact – what’s his name... in the engine room?”

“Clay.” Vic nodded. “Okay, and?”

“Tell them to meet us where we arrived, stat. Let’s go!”

“Okay!”

Glancing around quickly one last time to satisfy his fading curiosity for anything to do with this veritable ghost-ship, Flane exited the bridge on Vic Chapman’s heels. All was still and motionless, dusty and utterly derelict. And of course, creepy under lights.

Below decks, in the small engineer’s office in the *Kilgary*’s engine room, ensigns Miller and Clay had been sitting in some chairs beside the engine control desk as comfortably as they could in their viro-suits, chatting over trivia and not telling ghost stories. Looking around the place, and opening drawers and looking inside things felt a little like grave-robbing to them with all the likely former owners lying all around the place. Clay’s com-link beeped.

“Clay here.” He answered, just as the sound of Miller’s voice, laughing at an already forgotten joke, faded from hearing.

“Chapman here.” Said Vic. “You boys okay?”

“Yes sir!” Clay shrugged.

“Nothing strange been happening, anything worth reporting?” Vic asked, prompting in case they did.

“No sir – just itching to get outta these suits, pronto!”

“I know the feeling!” Vic empathized. “Now drop what you’re doing, get Miller and meet us at the exit point, stat!”

“Aye, sir!”

Captain Flane and Commander Chapman turned corner in the corridor, and immediately something odd caught Flane’s attention...

“Hang on a minute!” He said, perplexed. “Where’s the body that was here?”

The body they’d had to step over on the way to the bridge wasn’t there! There was no body in sight! It was gone!

“I don’t know, but I don’t like it!” Vic replied. “Chapman to All Team – report in!”

A quick staggered chorus of crewmen reporting “Here!” chimed over the combined com-link channel.

“Did anyone move a body lying in the piece of corridor up here near the bridge?”

There was a definite but brief tense pause before a chorus of “no’s” chorused on the com-link.

“If one of you did, and think it’s funny...” Vic threatened, “You’re not going to be laughing after we get back, that I can promise you! Now get to the exit point, double time!”

Clay and Miller began to jog. The gravity had picked up since the engine was running the generator and powering the ship’s systems, and so it was already near 1G, Earth-normal, making running a bit easier. They navigated the old ship’s dusty corridors, still and disturbingly vacant, turning a corner here, a corner there, making the journey back the way they had come earlier. After shaking his head unseen within his helmet a few times in puzzlement, a disturbed Miller grabbed Clay’s arm by the elbow and slowed down.

“Wait-a-minute! Wait-a-minute!” He panted, slowing to a walk and throwing his arms open wide in a frustrated gesture. “What’s going on here?”

“What do you mean?” Clay panted.

“You *seen* any bodies since we left engineering?” Miller asked tensely. “The ones we passed on the way here, I mean?”

Clay stopped dead. They both did. Clay turned and gave Miller a nervous look through the material of his helmet visor.

“*Fuck this shit!*” He cursed, pulling out his blaster and disengaging the safety before turning to run again. “*Move it! Let’s get outta here!*”

Just then the lights went out again all over the ship. The pair were momentarily in complete darkness before their helmet lights automatically came back on again, illuminating the bulkheads and deck plating that surrounded them.

“What happened?” Miller moaned. “Power went off, man!”

“That’s not possible!” Clay argued in the suddenly very claustrophobic near-darkness. “There’s plenty of fuel! Systems were engaged and locked! It couldn’t just have *gone off* – someone had to *turn* it off!”

“Shit, man!” Miller cursed, whining. “I *really* hate the dark!”

“What you want me to do, Miller?” Clay snapped sarcastically, “Go back there and turn the lights on again? You can count me out! Now – we runnin’ or what?”

That was when they noticed the vibration in the deck plate, felt it in their feet, through the insulated soles of the environment suit boots. A steady, rhythmic beat, like footsteps.

“Look at that!” Miller cried out, awe-struck. His helmet lights turned the way they had just come to illuminate a shadowy, shuffling motion in the blackness – the shapes of humanoid forms, recognizable but deformed. Rocking and lurching stiffly from side to side, came a disheveled cluster of figures that looked uncannily like the corpses that had decorated the engine room they had just left only minutes before! They clumsily marched out of step, jostling each other, filling the corridor right across, shoulder to shoulder, jockeying for position – their jaws opening and snapping shut seemingly independently, the irises of their dead gray eyes glinting with reflected bright LED light, fixed upon them! Their voices, long dry and withered could raise no more than a dry rumbling growl that sounded almost like distant very reluctant thunder. Clay gawked. There was loads of *nope* – and also a *hell no* or two – in there!

Instinctively, still unable to believe his eyes, Clay raised his blaster and fired! A bright red bolt *whooshed* across the steadily shrinking distance, struck a beige-brown uniform in the abdomen – and went clean through with a shower of mushy gore. Undeterred, the ghastly apparition carried on, seemingly unaffected by the dinner-plate sized hole that Clay had blasted through it! Miller snapped out of it and brought his own blaster out to play. He fired off a bolt, causing an arm to drop off at the shoulder! The partly mummified limb made a funny sort of *thump* as it struck the deck plate – and its former owner casually stepped on it and carried on without any reaction. As slowly as the horrid mob seemed to be moving, the distance had already shrunk a great deal – too close for comfort – and at the rate Clay and Miller seemed to be firing, they would be overrun in mere seconds!

“Run!” Clay shouted, and turned and fled with Miller at his heels.

Meanwhile, one deck above, Captain Flane and Commander Chapman had noticed a striking absence of dead bodies that had been spotted in passing earlier that day, and to say they were not tense or puzzled by this – if not actually freaked the fuck out about it – would be quite inaccurate. Flane had remarked how unusual it was to be less disturbed by dead bodies lying around than their *absence!* They picked up the pace, and had just arrived at the pick-up spot – just in time to find an agitated Pierce and Berry already waiting for them.

“Sir!” They greeted their seniors together as they drew up to them.

“Where’s Clay and Miller?” Vic asked them.

“Haven’t seen them since we split up after leaving here, sir!” Berry said.

“Clay, Miller, this is Chapman, over!” There was no response for an alarming number of seconds. “Clay, Miller, this Chapman, respond!”

“*Here, sir!*” Clay shouted, panting. It sounded like he was running. “*We’re on our way – all hell just broke loose down here!*”

“*What’s going on?*” Vic barked. “*Report!*”

“*You wouldn’t believe me if I told you!*” Clay panted.

“Try me!” Vic retorted.

“*Zombies!*” Clay reported, nearly breathless. “*Fucking dead things – walking! They’re right behind us!*”

What is this? Flane thought skeptically in the awkward silent moment that followed. *A joke?*

“*It’s true, sir!*” Miller chimed in, sounding as breathless and scared as Clay.

“What’s your E.T.A.?”

“*Dunno!*” Clay quavered, his voice vibrating with each foot-fall. “*We’re... nearly at the stairwell we used on the way in... Ten minutes maybe?*”

“Okay, we’re waiting here for you!” Vic intoned as reassuringly as he could. “Hurry up!”

“Blasters!” Flane ordered, taking his out of its holster and arming it. Vic followed suit. Pierce and Berry just exchanged worried looks.

“Where’re your blasters?” Flane asked them, more surprised than angry. *How careless could people be?*

“We lost them in that flood of coolant, Captain!” Pierce explained, almost like a kid trying to convince the teacher that the dog really had eaten his homework. “We couldn’t find them again after! Lost the scanners too!”

“Sorry, Captain!” Berry apologized, looking frightened.

“Shit!” Flane muttered. “Sorry won’t mean jack if anything attacks us!”

“Yes sir!” Pierce said apologetically.

“Look for something you can use as a weapon – a pipe, a wrench, a plank – anything!” Vic ordered them, pointing at a pile of rubble at the side of the room. “Hurry! If two of us have to defend four of us, we won’t last long!”

“Defensive positions!” Flane ordered. “Vic, take the corridor at that end – I’ll cover that one!”

“Aye!” Said Vic, as the two embarrassed and frightened ensigns began rummaging through the pile of broken items near the corner to look for anything they could use as a weapon against the undead. Meanwhile, Flane opened a channel on his com-link back to the Mercury.

“Mercury!” He called over his helmet mike. “This is Flane – standby to bring us home!”

Static assaulted his ears, loudly and quite unexpectedly. He winced. *What the – ?*

“Mercury!” He tried again. “This is Flane – respond! Come in, Mercury!”

“Trouble?” Vic asked via the closed local channel.

“Can’t raise the ship!” Flane replied, worried. “Maybe it’s my comlink – try yours!”

“Okay!” Vic nodded from the other end of the room, near the entrance to the corridor at that end. A few long moments later, he reported back over the same channel. “No go! Looks like we’re cut off!”

“Jammed?” Flane asked. Meanwhile, Pierce and Berry had found what looked like short lengths of steel conduit, and were giving them a few experimental swings – perhaps to offset their doubts about the effectiveness of medium-weight tubing as a weapon.

“Fuck knows, Stu!” Vic replied with disgust. “All I know is, under the circumstances, we better hope someone at the transmatter desk is watching our movements, notices something out of the ordinary, and isn’t sleeping on the job!”

Flane hoped so too. If the operator was watching his sensor display and saw them running around over here, and meeting up at the exit point – and tried to raise them on the com-link... they might realize there was a problem and shift them out!

“Okay!” Flane nodded, tightening his grip on his blaster, which felt dull and awkward in the grip of his glove. “Stay sharp, people! Vic, make sure you don’t hit our people when they arrive here!”

“Roger!” Vic replied tersely from his post guarding the other corridor entrance, his eyes on his portascanner, trying to pick up life-signs or motion – anything that might give early warning. Flane turned back to the vacant dark space that was the corridor behind him, blaster ready. Pierce and Berry stood in the middle ground between them, holding their pieces of pipe ready – too tense to feel as silly as they looked. A few moments passed in silence. *Where were Clay and Miller? What was taking them so long?*

“See anything yet?” Flane asked Vic.

“Nope. Silent as a tomb.” Vic said, half-jokingly. “Your end?”

“Ha – ha!” Flane retorted with a hint of sarcasm. “Nothing.”

Then Vic noticed a sudden vibration in the deck plate under his feet, traveling through the insulated soles of his boots – the steady, rhythmic beat, like footsteps, growing gradually more intense! His scanner started beeping to indicate that it had detected motion a short distance away, and his eyes shot up to look into the darkness beyond the vacant beams of his helmet lights.

“I’ve got motion!” He cried over the com-link. “Movement! Lots of signals! Definitely something moving down there!”

Flane scurried to get over to Vic.

“Keep an eye on that corridor!” He told a nervous-looking Pierce as he shoved his portascanner into his free hand on the way past.

“Aye sir!”

“Clay? Miller?” Flane asked Vic as he arrived beside him, his own helmet beams cutting into the dark down the empty corridor. Vic shook his head sullenly, his blaster up.

“Whatever it is, it’s more than two!” Vic said, his eyes darting between the darkness and the scanner display. “And no life readings!”

“Well, that cuts out Clay and Miller.” Flane mused. “Range?”

“Twenty meters!” Vic read. Flane opened a com-channel to his two missing team members.

“Clay! Miller!” He called. “Where are you? ...Respond, dammit!”

There was no reply. Instead, something stirred on the fringe of the blackness, a slow, rhythmic shuffle right at the edge of the light cast by their shifting helmet beams... what looked like... shoes? Feet? A row of them stretched across the width of the corridor, slowly stepping, dragging, shuffling towards them!

“Contact!” Vic reported

“Pierce! Berry!” Flane called. “Anything your side?”

“Negative, Captain!” Berry replied, turning back to look his way, clutching his pipe like it was a sword. Flane took a step to the right of Vic, putting about four feet between them, and turned to face the oncoming threat.

“*Keep our backs clear! Shout if you see anything coming that way!*” He ordered, adopting a kneeling position, aiming with his blaster.

“Aye!”

Vic and Flane’s helmet lights illuminated the oncoming shapes of what looked like people! Men and a few women – or more accurately, what had *been* men and women – were shuffling and lurching stiffly toward them, rocking slightly from side to side, and showing no apparent sign of consciousness! One or two seemed to be missing arms and bits of body here and there, and sported what looked like fresh blaster impacts! There was no way they could be alive – not having holes that size blown clear through their abdomens! It was a nasty sight to behold, and no mistake! Jaws opened and closed, heads lolled off-center and moved slightly with each step. White-gray skin, some stained with decay and green residue from engine coolant, glistened in their lights – faces pale and gaunt, distorted features stared blankly into the distance as the marched onward... Their dead gray eyes shone with reflected bright LED light! And the sound – it was hard to describe! The dry rumbling growl that sounded almost like low thunder in the densely packed space as it became audible over their external sound receptors!

“Ah!” Flane cried, recoiling in horror! “*Shit! Open fire!*”

Vic and Flane, the only two there with blasters, let rip! A rapid, withering fire of bolts of energy *whooshed* across the slowly closing gap between them and ghastly oblivion! The sound of the impacts, not unlike little strikes of lightning, filled the air – accompanied by a spray of bits of decayed flesh, bone fragments, burning fabric and plastic, singed bio-matter, and general *yuck* that rained down on the deck! But the undead mob lurched onward, undeterred, stepping on the fragments as if they did not matter.

“*Aim for the legs!*” Flane ordered. “*Aim for the legs!*”

“Roger!” Vic replied, and together with his Captain, they aimed at the knees of the enemy. The results were somewhat different this time. Bodies came tumbling and crashing down, more like felled trees than wounded human beings! And even that did not stop them – as those in front toppled over, those behind them lurched onwards, stepping on or over the fallen. Vic grimaced as one did so and its foot sank down into the abdomen of a fallen animated corpse that seemed not to notice! “*Urrgh!*”

They continued to fire at the mob, cutting down those in front – but even so, those whose legs had been shattered or blown off, continued to crawl along behind – and the mob was advancing all the time, gradually, steadily – and now they were only *feet* away! And there seemed to be plenty more behind where that came from!

“Fall back!” Flane told Vic, as he rose to his feet and began stepping in reverse towards Pierce and Berry. “Slow retreat! Keep firing!”

That's when Pierce cried out behind them, and Flane heard the sound of a pipe striking something that sounded like a slab of wet cement.

"They're behind us now too!" Vic shouted above the noise. Flane looked back. A horde of undead were advancing out of the other corridor that led to the bridge! Pierce and Berry were swinging at them, and honestly, not doing much damage! Their blows hit home, hard – to the point where the pipes they were using rang softly like bells, vibrated and even bent – and would have crippled or killed any living mob – but still these lurching, grunting, nightmarish *things* came on, clutching, and grabbing at them!

"Keep firing! Hold this flank!" Flane told Vic and turned to help Pierce and Berry, who were getting swamped. Berry was down on the deck, with several of the dead craning over him... He fired at the nearest ones, as rapidly as he could take aim – and squeezing the trigger as quickly as the mechanism would allow! Five or six fell around them within the first few seconds, while Pierce grabbed Berry by the arm and began to pull the scrabbling man free from the melee', backing away. Flane joined them, still firing at the advancing dead.

"That's not working!" He observed. "Get behind me – between me and Chapman!"

Still clutching his pipe, Peirce supported Berry – who was now limping, and had lost his – and made their way to the center of the room. Flane was mentally cursing the inconvenience of only having two blasters between them! Also, the hindsight of only having brought light standard hand blasters on this trip! A sweeplaser – the energy-weapon equivalent of a platoon machine gun – would have been a drastic step up!

Flane held the horde back as long as he could, but moment by agonizing moment found himself being gradually pushed back to the center, closer to Pierce and Berry, who seemed to be honestly pretty useless at that stage without any real weapons. He turned to check on Vic, who wasn't as far off anymore either, still firing fiercely, his helmet lights flashing this way and that as he turned to aim. Flane turned his full attention to the mob. Where had they all come from? This couldn't *all* be the former crew of this ship! Perhaps they had been, as someone – perhaps *Damn* – had suggested, visiting crews that had come to check on this ship the way they had? In that case, the outcome didn't look very encouraging... And the dead didn't seem to fear damage and dismemberment the way living creatures did.

Just then, Vic Chapman shouted out, and by the time Flane could afford to risk turning his head in order to see what was happening, mere moments later, his executive officer was on his back, being swamped by moving corpses – those reaching down to him, those who had fallen over him, and those crawling across the deck plating. He fired one more bolt from his blaster, and then another, and then seemed to be wrestling with the insipid, grabbing claws of the dead. His portascan was wrenched out of his left hand and lost to the mob. Several of the dead had their clutches on him, and were running their dreadful hands along the outside of his environment suit, clawing at it, biting at it, seeking the living flesh within!

"Vic!" Flane shouted, just as his friend disappeared beneath a layer of writhing groaning corpses! Pierce meanwhile, heroically charged to the rescue, leaving Berry behind who was half-sitting, half-lying on the deck and not looking very *present* at the moment.

“Hang on, sir!” He shouted, grabbing a zombie by the pony tail to yank it off the scrum that concealed his senior commander – only to find the clump of dingy brown hair dangling in his hand, scalp and all! Tossing it aside, he swung the pipe round, smashing the rear of the exposed skull so that it resembled a crushed egg shell. It must’ve been a rotten egg, because black fluid began to seep out, dribbling and splashing down the back of the creature’s body as it slumped! “I’m coming!” He shouted again, delivering a kick to another corpse of the male persuasion, aiming for the head. That one must’ve been a little ripe, because the head came right off, and rolled along the floor, it’s eyes still turning and its jaws still working – talk about *weird!*

“Aim for their heads!” Pierce shouted over the com-link. “That kills ‘em!”

Flane fell back a little more, adjusting his aim a little higher this time, and firing. Head after head exploded into messy puff-balls of bone fragments, fetid brain matter and bits of steaming flesh! Headless corpses crumpled to the deck, and began to form a pile not too far from his feet! Flane began to feel a little like this might actually work out for them after all!

“Vic!” He managed to call on the com-link, somewhat distracted with aiming at the mass of heads that closed off that end of the corridor. *Bastards must’ve been hiding on the cargo deck for there to be this many!* He thought.

“*They’re...*” He heard Vic’s voice rasp anxiously and unsteadily on his earpiece, doubtlessly from their combined weight on top of him. “*Tryin’ to get in my suit!*”

Pierce swung his pipe a few more times, throwing in a few good kicks for good measure while he was at it, knocking the writhing, sleepless dead off the top of the pile. Some lay motionless on the deck after, their heads reshaped or obliterated – others went back to competing with newcomers to get at their prize. One fell right at his feet, and Pierce stomped its head flat without hesitation in a way that made a bit of a splash and a squelching noise. Those pressing from behind however were not standing there idly by any measure. They worked their way around the pile on the sides, and pressed forward towards Pierce. Meanwhile, Flane had his hands full firing in the other direction to secure that end! If only they could keep this up long enough! *These things had to run out soon! After all, how many of them could there be?*

Flane managed to fire at the corpses trying to outflank Pierce, whacking a couple of them in the head, but he couldn’t fight both flanks at once! He knew that if he and Pierce ended up standing back to back, it would be over – and every step backward he took, he knew it that much more for certain!

Ensign Pierce was swinging and kicking and stomping away at the fringe of the horde like he was his own favorite Viking warrior TV character! He seemed to be holding his own – and then a couple of arms reached out and grabbed him by the ankles, pulling him off balance till he fell over quite hard, screaming abuse at the undead. The last Flane saw of him, as he was bodily dragged into the scrum, face down and still holding his pipe with one hand, his helmet visor had been smashed... after some brief bloodcurdling screaming, Pierce’s com-link went dead, and shortly after that, some of the horrid apparitions seemed to have a bit of red wetness smeared all over their claws and faces than before... A blood-smeared helmet with a smashed visor got

pushed out by scrambling limbs, and rolled a short distance across the deck, answering their darkest questions.

There being no more resistance at that end for the moment, the wave rolled around the scrum and came towards Berry and Flane at a medium-paced shuffle. The others that had been at his back had almost reached Berry by now as it was.

“Seems they’re all warmed up now!” He breathed at the terrified looking ensign Berry, who clearly seemed to realize he was done for. He had no weapon, he was injured, and he didn’t stand a chance! There seemed to be no rescue forthcoming from the *Mercury* either! Flane grabbed a hold of his arm, and pulled on it. “Get up! Let’s go!”

“I can’t walk, sir!” He said over his com-link. “If I can’t walk, I can’t fight! I’ll jus’ slow you down and get you all killed – I’m done! Leave me!”

Flane reached a snap-decision, and put his blaster back in its holster so he could have both hands free – then reached down to grab Berry and hauled him forcefully upright, putting every bit of angry adrenaline to use.

“*You stow that shit right now, mister!*” He reprimanded, hooking his left arm through a surprised Miller’s right. The younger man seemed to be swaying slightly. Then Flane took out his blaster again, and aiming it, began leading Berry toward the approaching mob of undead terrors. “Stick close to me! That’s an order!”

“Aye...sir!” Miller replied, hardly able to believe his eyes as his Captain began to semi-tow, semi-support him to the line of lurching nightmares ahead. Flane drew up his blaster, the barrel steaming hot, and began firing again – clearing a path through the horde, hitting the revolting countenances with impressive pin-point accuracy! Then again, they were so close, he could hardly miss!

There were definitely fewer of the dead in that direction, so Flane patted himself on the back for that choice on his part. Berry struggled to keep up, but seemed to be managing – grunting and groaning as he limped along. As the last corpse in sight ahead fell noisily to the deck a little shorter from the shoulders up, Flane paused a moment to look back. Three or four more of the monsters were slowly following them, moving their heads and arms like automatons, as if they were big little kids following Daddy to ask for a hug. He quickly dispatched them with a round of quick shots, and he didn’t mean vodka – although that might be quite nice under the circumstances...

“Watch my back!” He told Berry as he turned his head so the helmet lights lit the scrum of undead that still seemed to be writhing on top of where he last saw Vic and Pierce, Flane.

“Pierce!” He called via the com-link. “Chapman! Sound off!”

“Here!” A voice wheezed. It was Vic. At least it sounded like Vic. At any rate, there was only one reply...

“Vic?” Flane asked.

“Yeah.” Vic groaned. “I thought dead people got lighter! Shit these things are heavy!”

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Surprisingly.” Said Vic, sounding amazed. “Been lying still, playing dead. Don’t think they’re buying it!”

“Well, they’re still on top of you!” Flane replied, realizing with some surprise that he was actually smiling. Occasionally, one of Vic’s helmet lights would shine through a gap in the scrum and illuminate the ceiling, which made Flane think of a sort of undead disco.

“No shit, Stu!” Vic wheezed. “I had no idea! Thanks for that! Fuckers’ve been trying to bite and twist my suit off! Lucky my helmet’s been holding! What shape are we in?”

“Still no sign of Clay, Miller or Pierce!” He said. “I think Pierce is K.I.A. – his helmet visor got smashed when they took him down. I wonder... what do these things do if they get to you? Do they *eat* you?”

“Thanks for the insightful and detached look at the daily unlife of the undead in their unnatural environment, dickhead!” Vic retorted with stinging sarcasm.

“Hey!” Flane reprimanded his exec. “That’s *Captain* Dickhead to you!”

Vic needed the laugh. And he laughed. It was a tired laugh, short of breath, and it sounded much more cheerful than he really felt. But it helped. It didn’t quite make up for the view, which consisted of varying parts of undead cadaver’s illuminated in the redirected light of his helmet beams, casting weird shadows on their distorted features as they dragged themselves over his visor, or probed it with parts of their bodies he’d rather not think about.

“Still got your blaster?” Flane asked, propping the ailing ensign Berry against the nearest bulkhead. He would’ve loved to turn off their helmet lights to help them hide better, but in this pitch blackness, and without their scanners, they would be blind and vulnerable – unable to see where they were going, or to see their enemy! Part of him actually wondered whether that would even make a difference.

“Yeah. In my right hand. Managed to...hold onto it...” Vic murmured his reply. “Why? You want it? You’ll have to come and get it! And then I’m gonna kick your ass!”

“Ha-ha!” Flane chided with mock-joviality. “If you can move your arm, aim for their heads. I don’t think they like that!”

“What the hell, why not?” Vic grunted. “Lyin’ here and getting gnawed on by dead folks isn’t exactly how I figured this day was gonna go anyways!”

A muffled *pop* sound came from somewhere under the scrum, and then another, marked by a dim red flash as light of the explosion leaked through the gaps between the squirming corpses. Another louder report coincided with a more visible red flash as one of the grisly faces close to Vic Chapman burst like a popped water balloon. Bits of gore spattered out of the areas

illuminated by Vic and Flane's helmet beams and disappeared into the darkness. Flane saw his friend's familiar environment suit – a little more colorfully decorated with the congealing contents of several corpses – rising out of the scrum of cadavers, some of which were now slightly shorter and no longer moving. The mass of zombies that had been pushing from behind seemed to have subsided considerably, and there were fewer visible at the edge of the scrum.

Seizing the opportunity, Flane dashed across the open space between them, and met Vic just as the struggling figure stumbled and fell to one knee. The adrenaline was pumping strongly through them.

“C'mon!” Flane told his exec as he helped him struggle to his feet. “We've got to regroup!”

“Regroup!” Vic panted. “Yeah. Good idea!”

“Mercury!” Flane called via his com-link again to check if he could get an answer. “Come in, Mercury!”

This attempt too, was in vain. No reply was forthcoming. Flane gritted his teeth and focused on helping Vic to where he had left ensign Berry. When they reached the spot at the mouth of the corridor at other end of the room, where the younger man had been only moments before, it was strangely vacant! Flane turned his head and lights from side to side, looking.

“Berry!” He called tensely, his hair beginning to rise all over his head. There was no response to that hail either! “Ensign Berry, respond! ...*Berry, where the fuck are you?*”

“Oh no!” Vic groaned, recovering enough to straighten up and stand on his own. “I have a real bad feeling about this!”

Both Flane and Vic began turning round in small slow circles, to cover everything in sight with their lights. Flane reached for his portascanner. The device blinked on out of standby mode, the little screen bright in the darkness that surrounded them. He did a quick sweep for life signs in the area. Nothing showed up in the results – nothing except for him and Vic! *Berry was injured! He couldn't have got far in what – four minutes? ...Not far enough to be out of range of the scanner!*

“What now?” Vic rasped over the com-link.

What now indeed? Flane pondered. *Mercury* was still incommunicado – for reasons unknown. Also for reasons unknown, there were dead bodies crawling all over this ship. They didn't seem sentient or intelligent – at least, not as individuals. Perhaps dimly aware – and acting together like a collective mind, similar to ants in terms of what they wanted. They certainly seemed to have a hunger for living flesh – and they seemed to be swarming after his team! It was obvious to him that Clay, Miller and the unfortunate Pierce had been taken by the swarm of undead. What had happened to Berry was – well, anyone's guess. There were none of the *zoms* around right there where they were. Had some unseen hand reached around the corner of the corridor at the far end and just snatched him away?

And what the hell was with them not being able to contact the *Mercury*? Were they being jammed? By what? The *zoms*? The *ship*? If that were the case, it would indicate some kind of

intelligence behind this whole thing – which he thought unlikely. Or rather, he pondered – wishing he could rub his chin with his hand – what he *preferred* to think unlikely. At least he still had his blaster. So did Vic. Two well-armed men against this nightmare seemed to stand a better chance.

Flane swallowed drily. He was tired and thirsty. Hungry too. It had been hours of this mind-numbing bullshit already! And they daren't take their helmets off for fear of becoming infected with whatever this thing was!

“C'mon!” He rasped, tugging Vic's arm to follow him. “This way!”

Vic seemed to have recovered well by then, and held his blaster ready for action as they started down the vacant corridor, in the direction leading back to the bridge. Behind them, a pack of the undead swarmed around what they presumed was the body of their comrade, ensign Pierce, apparently gorging themselves on his remains. They cautiously made their way to the turning, trying their best to do so as quietly as possible – it wouldn't do to make any noises that might attract more of them!

“Got anything resembling a plan?” Vic asked his captain.

“Not yet.” Flane replied. “How about you?”

“Yeap.” Vic replied tiredly, his sense of humor apparently still intact. “We get out of here, pronto. That's as far as I've gotten though...”

“Funny!” Flane managed to smile as they turned the first corner. The corridor was still completely vacant, aside from what could only be described as dust bunnies on the deck and abandoned cobwebs in the corners of the ceiling. It wouldn't do to let this situation break their spirits. That would be the end. It was hard enough grappling with the paradox of the reality of their situation – if the word '*reality*' indeed applied!

Suddenly, a door loomed ahead in the shadows that clung to the bulkhead to their left. The door itself was part-way ajar in the frame. Flane sneaked a peak through the gap inside. It was an office of some kind, probably the skipper's office. Aside from the dust-covered furniture inside, he couldn't see anything remarkable about it. But it offered a place to hole up for a few minutes, a place to think things through and perhaps mount a defense! It took the effort of both of them to force the door along its rails back into its frame far enough to allow them to pass inside. Unfortunately, they realized, there was no way they were going to get it to close again without power!

“Here!” Vic called, over at the former skipper's desk, sweeping the clutter off the top onto the carpet. “Help me with this!”

Flane helped Vic carry the desk over to the open doorway, where they upended it and leaned the top end against the opening. Flane jammed an armchair against the lower legs to help prop the obstruction up. The desk almost closed the entire doorway off – just a small gap remained above the top edge. Before Flane could even remark that their lights would leak out there and give

away their position to any passing zoms, Vic had rolled up a dusty throw that had been lying on a sofa against the bulkhead, and placed it to cover the gap.

“Home sweet home!” Vic sighed, planting himself on the right side of the sofa. Flane, tired out himself, sank down into the sofa beside him. For a long moment neither of them heard a thing beside the very faint sounds of their environment suit pumps recycling the air they breathed, scrubbing the waste gasses out, reprocessing the oxygen, regulating the humidity and temperature inside, recycling waste water, which also allowed them to drink some of it. It was a welcome respite, and drinking tubes extended into their mouths from the inside of their helmets, Flane and Vic Chapman caught their breaths and rested up.

As they did so, their eyes swept their surroundings. Behind where the desk had been, stood an old-fashioned wheelie-chair. Small items that had cluttered the desk – a pen holder, a computer screen, a brass desk-sign that read “Capt. P. Sickers” – lay scattered about the dusty carpet. Then, finally, they noticed the walls. Someone had scrawled words on the walls, in big red letters – “CURSE” and “GET OUT! MUST GET OUT!”

“Well, that’s just downright unsettling!” Said Vic in a flat, tense voice, breaking the silence. “We are so fucked! Yup... *Very, very fucked!*”

“How’s that escape plan coming, Vic?” Flane asked.

“Don’t look at me, man!” Vic half-snapped irritably. “You’re the captain!”

Okay, Flane paused. Rather than berate his first officer and friend, which would only serve to escalate things all round, he decided to draw him into working on a solution.

“Bet if we can make it to an airlock, we can get off the ship, get clear of whatever’s jamming our comms!” Flane postulated, looking at his companion. “Then Mercury should also be able to pick us up! How’s that sound?”

“Oh, go jump out an airlock!” Vic retorted.

“Exactly!” Said Flane, forcing himself to sound enthusiastic. “These things aren’t going to follow us outside, are they?”

“Lemme think, Stu.” Said Vic, not really ready to buy into the idea yet. “Four of us have been killed and probably eaten by what I can only describe as ‘*walking corpses*’. I’d say the possibilities are endless, wouldn’t you?”

“Ah Vic, I’ve known you a long time.” Said Flane sighing. “But I’ve never known you to be a quitter!”

“I’m not quitting!” Vic grunted back in frustration. “I’m tired! Angry! Pissed off! I want to get out there and kill those fucking things that killed Pierce, Miller, Berry and Clay! I want to get back to the ship – *our* ship – and back to a world that makes *sense!*”

“Then let’s get out there – find an airlock and we can do just that!” Said Captain Flane encouragingly and incredibly leader-like. “When we get back to *Mercury* we can blow the bejesus out of this thing!”

Vic began to nod. Slowly and gently at first... and then enthusiastically.

“Yes!” he cried. “Let’s get out there and kick rotten zombie ass!”

A few minutes later – while they were engaged in a running battle with a horde of lurching zoms in the now familiar dark corridors of the dead ship, at times being closely pursued by them, at others surrounded by them and cutting a path through with rapid accurate blaster fire – Vic and Flane’s enthusiasm for getting the hell off that ship held firm!

Along the way, they had a shocking encounter with two lurching zoms wearing very familiar environmental suits – with what was left of Clay and Miller inside. Bits had been torn out of the suits, as well as from their bodies underneath... reinforcing the importance of heeding the *Kilgary* medical officer’s warning...

Whether the pair had become infected when their suits were violated by their undead assassins, or after, when the teeth and juices of the dead had mingled with their recently deceased flesh in the many bite wounds visible – some down to the bone, was unclear. What was clear to Vic and Flane, was that after the blaster bolts had vaporized the ghastly, growling and snapping contents of the former ensign’s helmets, they weren’t likely to get up again!

The two survivors finally reached an airlock. There was no power, so they were faced with the problem of getting it open. Blasting the security cover plates beside the locks gave them access to the manual release mechanism. Pulling the manual release lever inside the small binnacle caused the thick, heavy door to slowly roll back into the door frame. The pair stepped inside and began the lengthy process of getting outside properly. After all, they didn’t want to just leave both airlock doors open – that would allow the remaining zoms to get sucked outside into space with the air inside the hull... and they wanted to contain the mess, not help it spread! Flane blasted the inner cover of the manual operating mechanism to gain access to that as well, and opened the small access panel while it was still smoking. A few vigorous turns of the crank inside caused the heavy inner airlock door to close again just as they heard sounds in the corridor outside of approaching *zoms* lurching toward them!

Racing through his mind were thoughts of what he intended to do about all this when he got back to his ship! Rather than leave a marker buoy and risk someone else falling prey to – whatever this was, he would have *Mercury* take the derelict in tow – and drop it into the nearest sun to make sure it was completely destroyed! Yes! That’s it! He would call it a Viking funeral for his dead crew members and all the others who had fallen victim to it! And as soon as they got out the lock into open space, where the *Mercury* could spot them and transmatter them aboard, he would make sure they transmattered them out of their viro-suits to avoid any possible chance of contamination, leaving them floating empty in space – and then put them back into the *Kilgary*, just to be sure!

“Hurry!” Vic shouted, sticking his head and shoulder through the gap to fire a few last bolts at the horde to slow them down. Then, as the leading edge of the door gently touched the back of

his viro-suit, he retracted back inside, and squeezed off a few shots through the gap as it narrowed further. The grinning and groaning visages of animated corpses in the corridor outside were oddly illuminated by the flashes of the bolts as they struck those beside them. A few limbs protruded through the closing gap, reaching for them, claw-like hands, blackened by time and nature in this odd void where reality did not apply... where the dead didn't die and stay dead, but instead hung around and tried to kill everyone else.

“Hurry!” Vic shouted again as Flane cranked the door past the point where it clamped the undead limbs tight in the last remaining space, and began to crush them down to the bone. “Close it!”

With a surprisingly ordinary crunching, splintering sound not unlike the snapping of dried twigs, the severed arms sagged, became still, and dropped to the deck grid inside the airlock. The door shut all the way to the end-seal of the door-rail, and the crank stopped turning under Flane's hand.

“Okay!” Flane breathed. “Now let's get out of here!”

Another blaster bolt took care of the cover plate for the manual release of the outer door mechanism. A quick pull of the lever inside the binnacle again, and without any warning, the outer airlock door began to roll open. The air inside began immediately to escape past the leading edge, making a brief shrieking noise and tugging at their suits as they clung to a side rail and braced themselves against it. After less than a minute the air had all gone and the feed from their external ambient sound sensors silent.

“This is it!” Vic grinned at him excitedly. “We're home free!”

Flane sighed. He just nodded and smiled tiredly back at his friend. He sure hoped so! They went up to the open doorway. Behind them, on the other side of that door, lay only death and dread. Ahead, they beheld open space. Stars dotted the darkness... stars and nothing else.

“Mercury!” Flane called via his com-link. “Come in! Mercury!”

There was still no reply.

“Guess we'll have to get further away from this thing!” Vic shrugged.

“Mercury!” Flane called again, sticking his head out the door way. “Come in Mercury!”

Suddenly a voice crackled over his earpiece, interlaced with static!

“*This is ...[static]...Mercury...[static]...ship...[static]...call...[static].*”

“Thank gods, Mercury!” Flane sighed with immense relief. “Can you hear me?”

“*[static]...immediate...[static]...position...[static]...one...[static]...*”

“C'mon!” Vic smiled, patting him on the back. “Let's go!”

The pair moved right up to the very tippy-tip edge of the airlock doorway, till the toes of their viro-suit boots rested across the two-inch deep door channel, and risked a look around the outside. There was no sign of the *Mercury* visible from that side of the *Kilgary*. Vic grabbed the side of the doorway, using the door channel there as a grip, and swung his legs around the outside, bringing the magnetized soles of his boots down on the outer hull plating, where they stuck fast. He offered a hand to Vic, and helped him climb round as well. It was always a little disturbing to suddenly find himself standing on the outside of a ship hull in black empty space, naked and exposed to the vast nothingness that seemed to hover just above his shoulders, seeming to tug at them a little... It felt better to have company beside him. There was no sign of *Mercury* on this side of *Kilgary*. Perhaps they would see it on the other side. They began to walk around the circumference of the dead ship's outer hull, feeling a little like flies crawling on the outside of a balloon.

“Mercury! This is Chapman!” Vic called. “Please respond!”

“*This is...[static]...star...[static]...request...[static]*”

They walked in the direction of the upper curve of the dead loderunner's hull – which formed an artificial horizon to them. After a few minutes careful walking – it wouldn't do to lose their footing and end up floating in open space – they began to see the upper surfaces of the *Mercury* rising gradually above it, the various small struts and pylons illuminated faintly by her running lights, green for port, red for starboard, in the old maritime and aviation tradition.

As they reached the apex of the upper curvature of the derelict ship under their feet, they could see their ship, *Mercury*, pretty much in the same position they had parked in half a day earlier. All her viewports were brightly lit. From this distance, from this close, they could make out the rivets in her hull plating, and the color of the bulkhead panels behind the viewports! Not a soul could be seen moving onboard... As they dwelt upon the strangeness of the scene before them, all of *Mercury's* lights suddenly went out.

“*This is I.S.S. Mercury,*” a voice said over their com-link earpieces, crystal clear in the sudden, frightening new darkness. “*...a starship of the Terran Pioneer Fleet, registry number P476. This is an automated distress call. We request immediate assistance. Our position is 4217.6288.9891.2311 Alpha... This is I.S.S. Mercury, a starship of the Terran Pioneer Fleet...*”

If you want to find out what happens next, you need to get “Static”, book 1 in the “Panic! Horror In Space” series!

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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!

You can find out more on ChristinaEngela.net.

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