

Beneath A Metal Sky

Your crew found a seemingly-abandoned space hulk, docked, and began exploring. Now your ship is missing, and that's not the worst of your problems.

Premise

The player's characters are all crew members on a small spacecraft. They have come upon an apparently abandoned space hulk and have docked for reasons to be described in the captain's questionnaire. When they board they find that the hulk (ISS Auerbach) is using minimal power and life support is at the lowest required levels – high enough to sustain life, but just barely. Moreover, there is a low but pervasive radiation count, and everything is covered by a strange grey dust that is also radioactive – and which may be discovered later to be irradiated human skin cells. When the characters have explored the place for a little while, they are attacked suddenly from behind by a creature that is incredibly fast and strong, and knows the ship like the back of its hand. There are several such creatures hiding around the place – formerly human, now hostile hosts for symbiotic entities.

Deception

Throughout the first act, it should seem as if all is normal and things have just been abandoned. They will find signs of a struggle, and when they are attacked it will seem as if some sort of creature is on board. It will become apparent that the creature is essentially human, although mutilated, and they should be led to believe that it is a person that has gone mad and murdered the rest of the crew. However, in Act III the players' characters should find out that in fact there are more than just one, and each is a host for a symbiotic and very hostile creature that is unhappy about being taken away from home.

The Beginning

The crew is approaching the Auerbach and is in the process of making preparations to dock and explore. It should be an atmosphere of anticipation and tension, but everything will seem normal...until they get a garbled transmission from somewhere in the ship.

Location

The ISS Auerbach has been in operation for a couple of years, sent into deep space to chart and catalogue a few unexplored territories that the brass deemed worth checking out. It is supposedly a transport ship carrying colonists from one of the better-established colonies to an outlying area. All records support this, but with a bit of hands-on investigation it will become apparent that all is not as it seems. There are areas that do not show up on floor plans and cannot be accessed without specific keycards, and also military-grade weapons (most of which have been fired in some of the more secure areas of the ship). The general layout of the ship is fairly simple for the most part – there are three levels of decks (1, 2 and 3 from the bottom up). Deck 1 is made up of cargo space and the docking area. Deck 2 is Ops (which includes the bridge, communications and navigation), Medical, and the Research area (which does not appear on the floor plans, and requires some fairly heavy clearance to get into). Deck 3 is made up of crew quarters, hydroponic gardens and the R&R section. Engineering is its own section, which takes up all three aft levels of the ship.

Important Characters

PFC Justin King – A young but resourceful member of the Independent States Aerospace Force (ISAF3619 Jersey Kansas), PFC King has holed up in a supply closet in the research area following the attacks. He has enough food to last him a couple of more days, but has been on the run for nearly a week now. He is in the early stages of radiation poisoning after running through the first aid kit's complement of rad-hypos. He's surprisingly calm, considering his dire situation, and knows a lot about the layout of the ship...but also knows that he's running very low on supplies, and can't possibly reach the escape shuttles alive without help.

The Creatures: These are humans infected by the research subjects, their bodies taken over by the malignant intelligence of the symbiotes. They are faster, stronger, and more agile than a normal human, appearing mutilated and skinless. The lack of skin is a side-effect of the radiation levels, which the symbiotes require for their continued existence. They are able to subsist on food that would be sufficient for a human being, but it has been a week or more and they have gone into semi-hibernation. They have a hive-mind intelligence, approximating a human level, and can consume some of their hosts' knowledge.

Act I

- The Call
- Exploration
- Restoring Power
- Attack!

Act II

- The Search
- Signs of Death
- Showdown
- Revelation of Humanity

Act III

- More Than Meets The Eye
- Truth Stranger Than Fiction
- They're Everywhere
- The Great Escape

Act I

The Call: The characters have come upon a large ship drifting in deep space, at least a couple of weeks from any known port. Their ship has docked, and they have crossed over to the new ship and are just starting to look around when their radios crackle to life. Due to the low levels of radioactivity present in the hulk and the consistency of its hull, they will be unable to identify its exact source. If a technically savvy character's player asks to do so, they can clear up the transmission slightly with a pull, identifying the voice as male and relatively calm, and can pick out a few words: "trapped", "supply closet", "research". The caller is PFC King, making a call from hiding.

Exploration: The ship can dock in the lower docking ring of the Auerbach with little difficulty, though with its systems mostly off and nobody manning the controls on the other side this will necessitate a pull on the part of the pilot. Once docked it is clear that the Auerbach is in power conserva-

tion status – the gravity generators are off, the life support systems are at bare minimum levels, and the temperature hovers at right around freezing. The corridors are all lit by flickering dull red running lights, making it difficult to see. Without gravity and with the poor lighting conditions, the players will have to pull to make any sort of quick movements – moreso if they are wearing suits. They will be able to survive (albeit uncomfortably) without a suit in the Auerbach, but prolonged exposure to the radiation will induce headaches, sickness, disorientation, hallucinations, and skin loss. There is a fine grey dust that floats in the air which makes it difficult to see clearly or judge distances, and may cause difficulties for characters without suits – they will run the risk of breathing it in or getting it in their eyes. Analysis will determine that the grey dust consists of irradiated human skin cells. The computers and other nonessential systems are offline, leaving the characters essentially navigating blindly. Nothing in here is overtly dangerous yet, but don't reveal that.

Restoring Power: The power to the Auerbach can be restored in the Engineering section. However, the characters must not only navigate successfully to the Engineering sector, but also find the failsafe mechanisms to turn it back on. Due to the radiation the circuit breakers have shorted (which a player can notice if they make an elective pull) and it will take a pull from a skilled technician to ensure that it doesn't blow – otherwise when they turn on the power there will be a surge and a lot of systems will be damaged – lights, heat, gravity, ventilation, computers, engines...pretty much everything on the ship (to build drama you can require pulls later on to deal with the effects of the damaged systems malfunctioning). It will also become apparent that the fusion reactor's shielding has been damaged somehow

The Characters

Character 1 (the technician) has a drug addiction. They have suffered quite a bit of loss, with a dead sister and someone close that they must leave behind while on the job.

Character 2 (the captain) has a phobia that interferes with the job. They have a scarred past, including a destroyed ship, an injury that required a cybernetic replacement, and some deed that required, in essence, a pardon. They may also have a secret agenda.

Character 3 (the medic) is a very ethical and principled individual who has in the past compromised those principles. They also have a shady past and a romantic interest in another crew member.

Character 4 (the navigator) is significantly over-, under-, or mis-qualified for navigational duties aboard this ship. They have smuggled contraband aboard the ship. They have people issues, having had a falling out with their family, and distrusting one of the other crew members.

Character 5 is non-human, and may or may not have numerous issues relating to that fact.

Character 6 (a researcher) was thrown out of the military. They have secrets: psychic powers, a secret possession, and a dark secret regarding a past quarantine.

(torn off by the symbiotes) and it is the source of the radiation leak. When the power is turned on, the hibernating symbiotes will be awakened and start to seek out the characters.

Attack!: When the gravity and ventilation systems turn back on (causing a lot of stuff floating around in the Auerbach to fall to the ground suddenly, and the dust to be kicked up in blinding clouds) the characters should each pull to keep from being injured by falling things or blinded temporarily by dust unless they have taken precautions. This is not the worst part though—a symbiote in the Engineering section takes advantage of the confusion to attack. Due to the flickering of the lights reactivating (or shorted out) it will have a significant edge over the characters, but it will flee after attacking, vanishing into one of the ventilation ducts before the characters can see much more than a blurry shape. Just to make things worse, a handful of the symbiotes take the opportunity to try and steal the characters' ship—either making off with it or damaging it significantly in the process, depending on whether the characters took measures to prevent that. If anyone was left on the ship, chase them off of it and onto the Auerbach.

Act II

The Search: After they recover from their first contact with the symbiote, the characters receive another transmission from King on their radios. It's still garbled but they can recognize that the voice is male. However, due to the radiation and the fact that he is effectively pirating their radios, all that the characters can make out is "hear me?" "King" "three six" "injuries" and "research". Now that the computers are up, however, floor plans of the Auerbach can be accessed...but if they do some cross-referencing (and maybe a pull, unless they can provide reasons that they would have surveying or architectural experience) the characters will discover that

not everything adds up—there are some areas that do not appear in the plans and some that are mislabeled or simply unlabeled or hidden—specifically the Research area and some weapons lockers in various places, most of which have been emptied already. However, without King's help or some spectacular work on the characters' parts, they will be unable to find or access the Research sector, and should start to explore the rest of the ship now that the power has been restored.

Signs of Death: In the Ops, Medical, and Crew sectors of the Auerbach there are signs of a struggle. Bloodstains up to a week old, shell casings and some minor collateral damage—but no bodies. There are a few weapons lying around—mostly pistols and a few shotguns. All of them are either jammed or empty, but with pulls the characters will be able to salvage ammunition from the jammed weapons and load the empty ones...not that it will do them much good. They will also discover that all of the food has been scavenged from the Crew areas and from the hydroponic gardens, taken into the air ducts and maintenance tubes in and around the Research, Medical, and Engineering sectors where the radiation is highest due to the unshielded reactor in Engineering and the radioactive material in Research and Medical.

Showdown: At some point when the characters are poking around they will be jumped by one of the symbiotes and it will do its best to put the hurt on them and drag them off into a ventilation shaft. It will be fairly easy for the group of

characters to overpower it and take it down—but give them a fight, make them pull a few times and generally have it make things unpleasant for them. If they are armed this will be much easier, but then they have to take care not to hit each other....

Revelation of Humanity: Once the symbiote is taken down they will be able to examine it in a bit more detail. It turns out to be a skinless human, still wearing the ragged remnants of clothing. Its face is otherwise mutilated and scarred by some sharp instruments, with lesions and tumors scattered over its body and head. At this point, details are partially determined by the players' questionnaires—play on their fears to determine the exact nature of the symbiote—whether worm, spider, virus or blob, and whether lodged in their trachea or their sinuses or brainstem. Regardless of its physical form the major details are the same—it is part of an intelligent hivemind that can control a host and access its senses and some of its memories and capabilities. It feeds on the host while at the same time increasing its adrenaline production when active (giving it incredible strength and agility) and also allowing the host to enter a state similar to hibernation, where nearly all biofunctions cease. However, if at all possible have the injuries the characters inflict on their attacker destroy whatever part of it the symbiote is inhabiting, or otherwise make it seem as if what attacked them was only a mutated human.

Act III

More Than Meets The Eye: By this time PFC King should be able to get in contact with the characters again, but this time the transmission is much clearer—whether because he was able to rewire his radio better or because the life support systems have reduced the ambient radiation levels. Regardless of the reason, he should be able to at least somewhat communicate with the characters. He will be scared, of course, but able to maintain his cool enough to give the characters directions to the Research area, and the passcodes to get through the door. Though he doesn't know *why* the problems started happening or what exactly went on, he knows that things started going badly after they retrieved some samples from an uncharted planet. King can also tell the characters that he knows there's more than one of the creatures, and that they're not just mindless zombies. He's part of the ISAF's equivalent of signal corps, a communication-ops specialist who is fairly handy with electronics but with little actual combat experience...and when the gravity was turned on, his ankle was twisted badly in an awkward fall. He will be a valuable resource, for he knows the Auerbach quite well—but he only knows what he's seen since things started going badly, and will be a liability with his injury. Some important things that he knows, however, are that the samples were stored in one of the laboratories in the Research sector, and he can also tell the characters where the escape shuttles that are not on the floor plans are. As if it wasn't abundantly clear already, it should be quite obvious now that not only is the government involved and the military has a presence on this supposed colony vessel, but there's a lot of stuff happening under the table.

Truth Stranger Than Fiction: What really happened should become apparent through some information gathering, utilizing various computer records and the notes left in the Research and Medical sectors. Obviously the ISS Auerbach is not a colony vessel, but a research vessel for the ISAF. It has been in operation for a couple of years, doing pretty standard search-and-catalogue sweeps along its route. On its most recent sweep some of the samples that were brought back (some radioactive rocks of an unknown type) turned out instead to be eggs, containing the symbiotes. In the last entry, one of the creatures is described, though the report ends rather abruptly (the researcher was attacked and taken over by one of the things mid-report). Undocumented, the other researchers were overpowered one at a time by the new host and infected with the symbiotes—each new member adding to the strength of the hive until the entire research team was infected. Some of the crew managed to escape in the escape shuttles, but some were trapped and unable to do anything but make a stand against the symbiotes—those who survived were taken and infected, with all casualties taken into the hive's food storage area (somewhere in the ventilation system, but getting there would be a suicide mission). King is the only remaining member of the crew, and there are at least a hundred of the symbiotes still around. All of the engineering staff either escaped or were killed, so when the failsafes for the reactor activated after 24 hours of no input, the symbiotes couldn't keep the life support systems going or get the engines

online. Now that they have, however, some of them know enough to pilot the Auerbach, and will be heading for the nearest source of fresh meat...the nearest port. The characters will realize this last part as the ship's engines suddenly fire up.

They're Everywhere: If the characters don't suggest it, King will realize exactly what the symbiotes are planning... and insist that they be stopped by whatever means necessary. He knows where the escape shuttle is, and will withhold that information if necessary to convince the characters to go to Engineering with him and set the reactor to overload. The trip to Engineering shouldn't be *too* harrowing, but it should be filled with paranoia as the symbiotes are now more active. Once the characters get there and begin messing with the reactor, though, all sorts of alarms should go off, which will alert the symbiotes to their presence. And now there are a hundred or so of them between the characters and their escape.

The Great Escape: This should be a pull-fest with ample opportunity for heroic sacrifice. If any of the characters decide to stop and fight they should be severely inconvenienced at best, and more likely will be dragged off by a handful of the symbiotes and infected, requiring pulls to maintain their own minds. It's a long way between Engineering and the escape shuttle hidden in the cargo area, and the characters are better off using their pulls to get safely to their destination with PFC King (they have to keep him alive in order to find the shuttle), rather than fighting the symbiotes. Eventually, though, they will reach the pod and manage to flee the Auerbach, the overloaded reactor destroying the ship and the symbiotes in the explosion, and causing a nice cinematic fireball in space behind the pod before the long journey home.

You have left someone behind that you visit every time you're in port. Who is it? Why can't they come along with you?

You were placed aboard this ship as the technician because you specialize in what sort of drives?

You suffered some sort of injury, and now have a cybernetic prosthetic. What do you miss the most about having your original body part? What is the best part about having the prosthetic?

To give yourself that extra kick needed during those life-or-death 20 hour long repair sessions, you have become addicted to a stimulant with a somewhat nasty side-effect. What is the side-effect? Do your shipmates know?

How did your sister die?

In what ways would you be better suited for your boss' job?

You are the first member of your family to go into space. Why?

What was the worst decision you ever made due to your stim habit?

What scared you most as a child?

What is your filth threshold?

A ship like this requires a lot of funds. Where do those funds come from? How do you feel about the source of those funds?

What is your name?

As captain of your ship, what part of your management style upsets your superiors? Why?

Who was your ship named after?

When your last ship was destroyed, what did you risk your life to save?

What class did you enjoy most at the academy, and why didn't you excel in it?

What food that most people like can't you stand?

You have a phobia you developed during your first mission. How has it interfered since then?

Because of a terrible injury, you had to have part of your body replaced by cybernetics. What was replaced, and what are the capabilities of its replacement?

Even though the record was wiped clean, what haunts you from your past?

You often find yourself envious of what other character? Why?

How are your quarters decorated?

Your ship docked with a seemingly abandoned space hulk. Why are you there?

What is your name?

Where or how did you get your medical training? Did you enjoy your training?

Where are you in the chain of command on the ship?

Normally, you are a paragon of your morals, which isn't always convenient. However, in one regrettable instance, you needed to go against them. What do you regret most about that encounter?

What can you do that most other people you know can't?

You see a lot of odd things in space. What is the strangest thing you have ever witnessed?

Who is the only one aboard to have ever beaten you at chess?

You have a romantic interest in one of the other crewmembers. Does he/she know? How does this affect your work environment?

What soothes those tension headaches you get?

When do you feel most alone?

What is that thing, and why do you have it?

You have a somewhat shady past, leading to the acquisition of some very useful skills. What did you do, and what skill did you learn from it?

What is your name?

Normally a navigator of your skill would not be assigned to this sort of ship. Why are you here?

Where did you get that scar?

Why don't you like being the age you are?

You are normally very close to your family, but recently you have fallen out of touch. Why?

What piece of contraband have you smuggled aboard? Who else knows about it?

When do you feel most alone?

Which member of the crew don't you trust? Why?

Why are you also in charge of the inventory?

What hobby do you have that occasionally comes in handy?

What disease do you fear most and why?

What did you do during your last shore leave?

What is your name?

If people observe closely, they can tell that you are not human. What is the clue, and what are you?

You consider yourself the most valuable member of the crew. What do you do, and why do you consider that so important?

You have a habit that you try to keep under control because it's somewhat annoying. However, when you are stressed, your control slips a little, and it comes out. What is it?

How did your first pet die?

Your training has given you a wide range of skills. What wasn't covered?

What talent do most people never realize that you have?

Because you are not human, your crewmembers interact with you differently than they do each other. How do they act towards you?

What would you rather be doing for a living?

What are you most ashamed of?

Why is next month a big month for you?

Is it unusual for someone like you to be working for a human crew? What did you do to get this assignment?

What is your name?

You were placed aboard this ship as the primary researcher because of a recommendation from whom?

How does your specialty help out the ship's purpose?

During part of your research assistantship, an experiment awakened latent psychic powers within you. What are they?

Why were you thrown out of the military?

What possession do you have that the others don't know about? Why haven't you told them about it, and how do you conceal it?

What are you most proud of?

Where did you go for your last vacation?

You once had to watch a fellow researcher die, because of quarantine. What did you do to trick people into believing that you weren't contaminated?

What did you hate learning as a child, but has since come in handy?

What recurring dream do you have?

What annoys you most about one of your shipmates?

What unusual hobby do you have?

What is your name?