THE NEXT ONES

A Fiasco playset for a doomed generation aboard a colonization vessel.

The Score

Humanity has made it.

A generation ship, carrying thousands of colonists in cryogenic storage, has finally reached its destination. Unfortunately, another vessel equipped with faster-than-light propulsion arrived decades earlier. Its passengers established a colony on the planet below.

Your ship is now in orbit. The colony refuses to let you land.

They claim your vessel is contaminated. They won't explain much further. Their automated message repeats at regular intervals, politely asking you to remain in orbit until a reconnaissance team can be dispatched.

You wake up from cryostasis to find that most of the ship is empty.

There are thousands of empty cryogenic pods. There are signs of violence, improvised repairs, abandoned equipment and strange organic growths in places where organic growths have no business being.

You don't remember much. Nobody does.

Something has been living aboard this ship. Something slow, persistent and extraordinarily difficult to understand. It grows across surfaces, consumes metal and organic matter, and produces substances that make people see things. Sometimes things that aren't there. Sometimes things that might be.

Previous groups of passengers have woken up, tried to understand what was happening, and eventually disappeared.

The automated systems have simply kept waking people up.

Now it's your turn.

The situation

- The ship cannot land. Its landing shuttles are badly damaged.
- The colony will not send help until it understands the contamination.
- The ship's automated systems are unreliable but operational.

- Most of the colonists are gone. Some are still asleep.
- The alien organisms are everywhere, but they aren't particularly interested in chasing anyone.
- The people aboard have incomplete memories, questionable perceptions and a remarkable ability to make bad decisions.

You have a ship, a planet you cannot reach, a problem you don't understand, and people you probably shouldn't trust.

Welcome aboard. You are the next ones.

Generalized lore

This isn't really a story about fighting aliens. It's a story about people trying to make sense of a situation that is slowly slipping beyond their control.

The organisms are something like enormous space-dwelling barnacles, or a colonial slime mould. They attach themselves to spacecraft, slowly consume available materials and build protective structures from whatever they can digest. They survive vacuum, move at an almost imperceptible pace and seem to possess some form of collective intelligence.

They aren't conventional predators. They don't chase, stalk or ambush. Their presence is simply incompatible with human life.

They release biological and chemical byproducts. Some affect the nervous system. Others interfere with perception, memory and judgment. Concentrations vary throughout the ship. Some compartments are relatively safe; others are decidedly not.

The ship has artificial gravity, which means gases and other contaminants can accumulate in unexpected places. Its ventilation, power distribution and environmental controls have all suffered damage.

Previous waking cycles have left behind evidence of human activity. Messages, recordings, makeshift repairs, barricades, abandoned plans and contradictory accounts of what happened.

Some people tried to escape. Some tried to contain the organisms. Some tried to communicate with them. Some simply went mad.

The colony knows very little. It has detected contamination and refuses to risk its own population.

Nobody is coming to save you. At least, not yet.

Movie night / From the Library / Game Night

A few useful references for the intended atmosphere:

- Event Horizon (1997) – claustrophobic spacecraft horror, unreliable perception and people losing their grip on reality.
- Solaris (1972) – the original Tarkovsky film. Memory, identity and the impossibility of understanding something truly alien.
- Alien (1979) – industrial spacecraft interiors, isolation and the atmosphere of a place that has become hostile.
- Aniara (2018) – existential dread, a doomed journey and the social consequences of being trapped in space.
- The Thing (1982) – paranoia, distrust and uncertainty about what is actually happening.
- SOMA (2015) – identity, consciousness, human memory and the horror of understanding too much.
- Pandorum (2009) – amnesia, a generation ship and the consequences of a mission going wrong.

Tips

The tone

Aim for creeping psychological horror mixed with human absurdity. People should be able to make terrible decisions for perfectly understandable reasons.

The characters don't need to be stupid. In fact, it's more interesting if they are reasonably competent people who are simply operating with incomplete information.

Don't make every room horrifying. Sometimes the players should find a perfectly ordinary canteen with terrible coffee. Sometimes they'll find a screwdriver exactly where they expect it. Sometimes a person will remember something entirely mundane and correct.

Contrast is important.

The ship has no map

Don't prepare one.

Let the ship's geography emerge during play. Corridors, doors, rooms and landmarks can change, become confused or simply fail to match the characters' expectations.

A character can confidently remember that the infirmary is behind a particular door. Another can insist that the same door leads to engineering.

You don't have to explain every inconsistency.

The previous cycles

Use messages, recordings, personal belongings and physical traces to suggest that this has happened before.

Don't reveal the whole story at once. Let the players piece together the cycle themselves.

Some evidence should be contradictory. Some should be misleading. Some should be entirely accurate.

The organisms

Keep them slow. They are not monsters waiting around corners to jump out at people.

They are a biological process taking place on a timescale that humans find difficult to comprehend.

The real danger is what their presence does to the people aboard.

The characters

Give everyone a reason to care about the others. Shared history, dependencies, secrets and competing objectives are much more valuable than a group of strangers who happen to wake up together.

Encourage players to establish details of their characters' pasts during play. Amnesia is an opportunity, not a restriction.

Fiasco

Let the situation deteriorate naturally. Don't force the players to discover the aliens, repair the ship, escape or die in a particular order.

The organisms are part of the setting, not the protagonists.

The protagonists are the people aboard.

And they are going to make everything considerably worse.

RELATIONSHIPS...

Roll or choose from the following tables to establish relationships between characters.

1 – Professional relationships

1. A senior officer and their subordinate.
2. Two members of the same technical department who disagree about practically everything.
3. A medical professional and a patient who refuses to cooperate.
4. A security officer and someone they were once responsible for protecting.
5. Two people who were supposed to be in charge of different parts of the mission.
6. A specialist and the person who trained them, with a complicated history.

2 – Personal relationships

1. Former romantic partners who haven't seen each other in years.
2. Close friends who drifted apart before boarding the ship.
3. Two people who were planning to start a family after colonization.
4. Siblings who haven't spoken in a very long time.
5. Someone who owes the other a considerable personal debt.
6. Two people who were once inseparable, until something happened.

3 – Shared secrets

1. You both know that one of you wasn't supposed to be on this mission.
2. You covered up a serious incident before entering cryostasis.
3. You both know what happened to a missing member of the crew.
4. One of you falsified the other's medical records.
5. You were involved in a decision that cost someone their life.
6. You agreed to keep something from the rest of the passengers. Neither of you remembers exactly what.

RELATIONSHIPS...

4 – Mutual dependencies

1. One of you has a skill the other desperately needs.
2. You are the only two people who remember a particular procedure.
3. One of you is the other's emergency contact and next of kin.
4. You were assigned to work together for the entire journey.
5. One of you knows something about the other's past that they desperately want to recover.
6. You were supposed to look after each other during the mission. Neither of you has done a particularly good job.

5 – Conflict

1. You competed for the same position before the mission.
2. One of you believes the other was responsible for a preventable accident.
3. You have fundamentally different ideas about what should happen to the remaining colonists.
4. One of you reported the other for misconduct.
5. You disagree about whether the mission should ever have happened.
6. One of you believes the other is hiding something important. They are right.

6 – Unusual connections

1. You have exactly the same recurring dream.
2. One of you remembers the other from somewhere, but neither can explain where.
3. You have identical handwriting.
4. You both remember being assigned to a department that neither of you actually worked in.
5. One of you is convinced that the other has been awake before.
6. You have a shared memory of an event that neither of you can possibly have experienced.

NEEDS...

1 – To get out

1. To reach the colony, regardless of what it takes.
2. To repair a shuttle and escape the ship.
3. To convince the colony to send a rescue team.
4. To find a safe place to hide until help arrives.
5. To get someone specific off this ship alive.
6. To abandon everyone else and secure your own survival.

2 – To know the truth

1. To find out what happened to the original crew.
2. To understand why so many cryogenic pods are empty.
3. To discover what the colony knows about the contamination.
4. To recover a memory you know is important.
5. To find out what happened during the missing part of your own past.
6. To prove that someone aboard is lying about what happened.

3 – To protect someone

1. To keep a particular person alive, even if they don't want your help.
2. To ensure that nobody wakes the remaining colonists.
3. To prevent someone from discovering what you did.
4. To keep the group together, whatever the cost.
5. To stop someone from going somewhere you know they shouldn't.
6. To make sure that one particular person never remembers something.

NEEDS...

4 – To obtain something

1. To get access to the ship's command systems.
2. To find a functioning cryogenic chamber.
3. To secure the remaining medical supplies.
4. To obtain a complete record of the previous waking cycles.
5. To find a working means of communicating with the colony.
6. To gain control of the ship's automated systems.

5 – To settle a score

1. To make someone admit what they did before entering cryostasis.
2. To punish the person responsible for the current situation.
3. To get revenge for someone you remember losing.
4. To expose a secret that someone has kept for far too long.
5. To make someone suffer the consequences of a decision they made.
6. To prove that you were right all along.

6 – To accomplish something questionable

1. To establish contact with the organisms.
2. To find out whether the contamination can be weaponized.
3. To wake a particular person from cryostasis, regardless of the risks.
4. To destroy a section of the ship, even if people are still inside.
5. To conceal the extent of the contamination from the colony.
6. To find out whether you can survive without the rest of the group.

LOCATIONS...

1 – Cryogenic facilities

1. The main cryogenic storage chamber, mostly empty and eerily quiet.
2. A secondary cryogenic bay with several dozen occupied pods.
3. The maintenance room for the cryogenic systems, covered in handwritten notes.
4. A recovery room where people were supposed to wake up.
5. A cryogenic storage area that appears to have been sealed from the inside.
6. A small chamber with a single occupied pod that isn't listed in the ship's records.

2 – Habitation

1. The canteen, with old meals and personal belongings still scattered around.
2. Crew quarters, where some rooms look recently occupied.
3. A communal recreation room with a broken entertainment system.
4. The greenhouse, where plants have grown far beyond their intended limits.
5. A small observation lounge overlooking the planet.
6. An abandoned nursery, containing toys and personal effects.

3 – Command and communication

1. The bridge, with several malfunctioning control stations.
2. A secondary operations room that nobody remembers.
3. The communications array control room.
4. A security monitoring station with incomplete recordings.
5. The captain's quarters, which have been thoroughly searched.
6. A navigation room containing conflicting star charts and flight records.

LOCATIONS...

4 – Medical and scientific

1. The infirmary, with several damaged medical beds.
2. A laboratory containing samples of something nobody can identify.
3. A quarantine room with its doors sealed shut.
4. A medical archive containing incomplete records of previous awakenings.
5. A surgical theatre with equipment still prepared for use.
6. An environmental analysis laboratory with a peculiar smell.

5 – Engineering and maintenance

1. The main engineering compartment, full of noise and vibration.
2. A maintenance tunnel with exposed cables and pipes.
3. The power distribution room, where several circuits have been improvised.
4. The ventilation control centre.
5. A storage compartment containing tools, spare parts and unexplained organic residue.
6. The shuttle hangar, where the landing craft are visibly damaged.

6 – Uncertain places

1. A corridor that seems to go on longer than it should.
2. A room that one of you remembers visiting, but nobody else recognizes.
3. A section of the ship where artificial gravity behaves strangely.
4. A compartment with no apparent purpose, filled with discarded personal belongings.
5. A sealed bulkhead with something moving on the other side.
6. A room that appears to be an exact copy of another room elsewhere aboard the ship.

OBJECTS...

1 – Personal belongings

1. A photograph of several people, one of whom is familiar to you.
2. A handwritten letter that was never sent.
3. A personal diary with several pages torn out.
4. A small keepsake that somebody has carried for a very long time.
5. A child's drawing of the ship and something attached to its exterior.
6. A personal identification card belonging to someone who isn't listed in the crew manifest.

2 – Technical equipment

1. A portable environmental sensor with a damaged display.
2. A maintenance toolkit containing one tool that doesn't belong.
3. A handheld communication device that occasionally receives strange transmissions.
4. A portable power unit with very little charge remaining.
5. An emergency access key that opens more doors than it should.
6. A diagnostic terminal containing incomplete system logs.

3 – Evidence

1. A damaged recording of a previous awakening.
2. A printed list of names, most of them crossed out.
3. A handwritten warning that says: "DO NOT WAKE THEM."
4. A medical report with several unexplained alterations.
5. A security recording that shows an empty corridor, despite someone appearing in the reflection.
6. A damaged crew manifest containing names that don't belong to anyone aboard.

OBJECTS...

4 – Alien material

1. A small translucent shell made of organic matter and metallic fragments.
2. A sealed sample container holding something that moves very slowly.
3. A strange black residue that smells faintly sweet.
4. A piece of metal that has become soft and porous.
5. A clump of pale organic material that appears to contract when exposed to light.
6. A glass container containing something that resembles a miniature version of the ship's hull.

5 – Potentially dangerous items

1. A loaded emergency firearm.
2. An industrial cutting tool with a nearly depleted power cell.
3. A portable oxygen supply with a damaged regulator.
4. A container of highly corrosive industrial chemicals.
5. An emergency explosive charge intended for structural demolition.
6. A medical injection kit containing an unidentified substance.

6 – Things that shouldn't exist

1. A personal photograph showing two characters together, despite neither remembering the other.
2. A recording of a conversation that hasn't happened yet.
3. A cryogenic identification tag bearing the name of someone currently awake.
4. A maintenance report signed by someone who died before the ship departed.
5. A small object that one character remembers leaving on the planet.
6. A sealed envelope addressed to the next group of people who wake up.