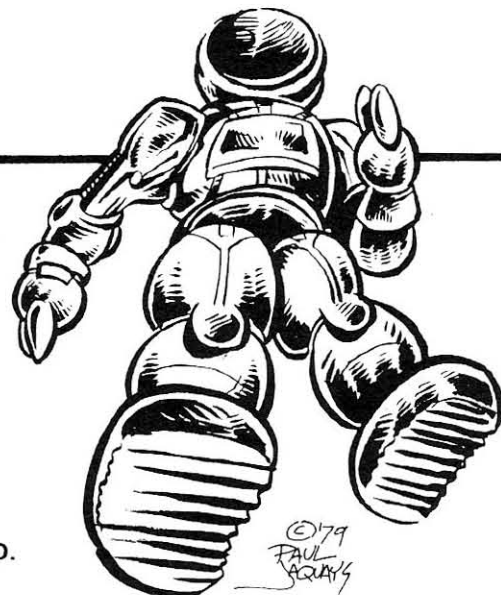


ALIEN AND STARSHIPS & SPACEMEN

By Leonard H. Kanterman, M.D.



"WELCOME TO YOUR NIGHTMARE" ■ THE MOVIE ■

When you go to see *Alien*, 20th Century Fox's science fiction/horror film, be prepared for a week of sleepless nights. By combining the classic themes and techniques of suspense from past works with the stunning visual effects first pioneered in *Star Wars*, this film is a milestone for the genre. No longer will horror be hampered by visuals limited to magnified insects and obviously cardboard miniatures. Faithfulness in the portrayal of a coherent, consistent technology imparts a believability to the terror of the situation.

The plot of *Alien* is a familiar one to devotees of *Star Trek* and other aficionados of SF. The crew on a massive, interstellar refinery/transport ship is prematurely awakened from suspended animation by an alien signal transmission. They land on the planet's surface to investigate the source of the transmission, and discover a ruined space vehicle, type unknown, and the skeleton of a creature from a strange, space-faring race. The cause for the creature's demise becomes obvious when one of the crew members is attacked by a parasite that had lain dormant for untold millenia. The crew member is rushed back to the ship for treatment; too late does the remainder of the crew realize that they have allowed their own vessel to become infested. The remainder of the movie details the efforts of the crew on the one hand and the parasite on the other to stalk each other, the suspense becoming magnified to the point where one no longer wonders who will be the next victim, but if any of the crew will survive and defeat the monster, as its power grows more awesome with each metamorphosis it undergoes while the crew is being diminished one by one.

What sets *Alien* apart from the run-of-the-mill "bug-eyed monster" film is, as mentioned above, its dedication to a believable technology. The first half hour of the film is devoted to the development of the mise-en-scene of the crew's ship. There is a convincing aura to the ship, combining the familiar (such as the grimy engineering area, which could have been at home in the New York subway system) with the fantastic, most notably the dazzling computer center, called "Mother." There is the same convincing feeling about the crew as about the hardware. The crew members are not extraordinary heroes, but merely people doing a job. They complain in a believable manner about being aroused early, griping in time-honored fashion about the chow, discussing their financial arrangements in an ironically trivial segment considering the challenge

to their very survival they are about to undertake. In short, they behave as anyone might be expected to in a universe where interstellar transport has replaced interstate trucking. None of the actors are "name" stars, and this helps underscore the intensity of their plight. It facilitates the projection of the audience into the situation on screen, and smooths the "willing suspension of disbelief" required for the success of a film such as this.

They reader may gather from the above that the film successfully reproduces the atmosphere engendered in a good role-playing game. So without further ado. . .

THE SCENARIO

Author's Note: In detailing the scenario below, I will be following the procedures of play outlined in Starships & Spacemen; it is the system I am most familiar with, having been the designer. Certainly, with minor modifications by the Game Master, the scenario could be implemented for other space-travel RPGs.

I was inspired to develop a scenario by the striking resemblance of the crew composition in the film to that portrayed in *S&S*. The crew is made up of a team of specialists, each performing his own realm of expertise but the concerted cooperation of all being required for success. The crew in *Alien* consisted of a commander, his subordinate, an unemotional science officer, the navigator, the communications specialist, and the determined, resourceful mechanic who can fix anything. This configuration is right off the bridge of the *Enterprise*. What was especially impressive was the smooth integration of races, sexes, and nationalities, each person a valued member of the team. *Alien* is free of the stereotype of the eye-batting, helpless female; indeed, the toughest and most admirable crew member is a woman, while the science officer is just the least bit effeminate.

Before the onset of play, and in secret from all the other players, the Star Master should give the following information to the science officer: "In the course of your travels, you will encounter an alien life form heretofore unknown. It is your mission to bring back a specimen of this life form unharmed for further study. This is your primary goal, and the remainder of the crew can be considered expendable to accomplish this

goal." Naturally, the science officer will find it to his benefit if the rest of the crew does not ascertain this information, lest they turn on him. At the Star Master's option, he may give similar information to the captain, or any other member of the crew, deleting the information about expendability. (It is always the captain's prime responsibility to insure the safety of his crew.) The scenario will work best if the science officer is of a different race than the rest of the crew.

The Star Master otherwise begins the scenario normally, giving a mission and a destination to the players. On the Star Map, he should secretly locate the alien's planet. The Star Master should try to keep random encounters at a minimum until the ship comes within a predetermined distance of the system, at which point the players will be informed that the an alien signal transmission has been intercepted. The ship will be able to "home in" on the signal to its source. Should a player wish to attempt to decode the transmission with the aid of the computer, he must roll less than his intelligence *minus 15* on a D20. (In S&S, all attributes are on a 1 to 20 scale, so a character's intelligence must be at least 16 for him to have any chance at decoding.) Even then, the computer will only be able to deduce that the message is a warning, and not a S.O.S. or distress signal.

When the ship arrives in the system, that particular planet will be the only one.

PLANET DATA

<i>Gravity</i>	<i>Medium/high</i>
<i>Temperature</i>	<i>Extremely cold</i>
<i>Atmosphere</i>	<i>Methane-ammonia/poisonous</i>
<i>Radiation</i>	<i>None</i>
<i>Life-forms</i>	<i>None</i>
<i>(Dormant spores not picked up as life-forms)</i>	
<i>Organic material</i>	<i>Present</i>
<i>Industrial material</i>	<i>Present</i>

The landing party may descend either by teleporter or by shuttle ship. Use of an auto-analyzer will enable the party to guide itself to the source of the transmission. This will be an alien spaceship, type unknown and not identifiable by computer. Aboard the ship there will be, at the Star Master's option, the remains of one or more aliens. Each alien body will be infested with one dormant spore, which will be revived and germinate by any investigation or probe, invading the nearest crew member.

Once invaded, the parasite will follow a certain life-cycle. The parasite will grow and develop over a period of several hours, and when development is complete, the host will be destroyed (ruptured) and the parasite will escape to continue its development. The parasite will invade a new host only once a day. With each cycle, the parasite will grow stronger, beginning with five damage points and doubling with each cycle up to a maximum of 160. In addition, the requisite time for development in the host will be shortened with each cycle by a half to a minimum of five minutes. There is no method of cure once invaded, and an attempt to dispose of the creature by disposing of its host will only result in the premature rupture of the host and release of the parasite. The parasite can be dealt with only when it is outside of a host. The parasite is invariably fatal to its host.

The parasite is not particularly intelligent, being a creature of instinct; it cannot be communicated with intelligently. It exists only to continue its life cycle, invading and developing

while killing its host. When the parasite runs out of hosts, it will enter its dormant stage again, leaving one spore behind in each prior host. Should the entire crew be killed, the ship will be "dead in space," but will continue to harbor the spores (to be used by the diabolical Star Master on another unwitting group).

The parasite's only source of food is in its host. Any sentiment being can be a host but, at the Star Master's option, the creature may have a preference for one race over another, invading other races only once the preferred hosts are expended. A skillful Star Master can parlay the terror of this, falsely reassuring one race that they are apparently safe, until the parasite has no where else to turn.

The parasite does not reproduce sexually, and will not increase in number. However, if more than one crew member is initially infected by exposure, there may be several parasites running loose on the ship at once, a situation most crews will find very difficult to deal with.

The creature prefers the dark, and will hide in dark, deserted passages awaiting its next host. It will be repulsed by light, as well as by extremes of temperature, both hot and cold, although this will not damage the creature in any way. Sound waves will also repel the creature. The creature can be damaged by conventional weaponry; however, damage from weapons will cause the creature to leak its caustic, acid blood, which will dissolve any known material including the structural components of the ship. The amount of acid released is proportional to the size of the creature at the time and the damage inflicted; if it burns through the outer hull of the ship, the ship is torn apart in the vacuum of space. Electrostun weaponry will repulse, but not harm, the creature.

How to kill the damn thing? Well, there are several methods. Ejection into the vacuum of space, either by shuttle, airlock, or transporter, will kill the creature. Projection into the psionic plane will just result in mental invasion for the next life cycle, with re-emergence into the physical plane. Damage from either conventional or atomic weaponry will destroy the creature (if its hit points are exceeded); however, acid leakage must be considered. Finally, the creature can be neutralized by caustic alkali agents, since its blood is acid. All this information is potentially discernible to the players from the computer, if they ask the right questions. (In S&S, one of the Star Master's roles is that of the computer. However, the computer can answer only yes-no questions, and interprets the questions literally.)

The objective of this scenario, quite obviously, is survival. Despite the instructions to the science officer, it is impossible to bring the creature back alive unless the entire crew is killed. This initial conflict of interest, along with the inevitable realization that the destruction of the parasite is the only feasible alternative and that concerted action is necessary for any chance of success, will lend a credible suspense to the encounter.

Star Master's Note: This scenario is a killer. The Star Master may find that once the parasite gets established on a ship, it is beyond his control to help the crew members rid themselves of it. The Star Master must be cognizant of the fact that many of the player's favorite characters will not survive, and be willing to deal with the consequences. You can only hope that one of your players will at length be able to say. . . "Got you, you bastard!"

