

The Starlight Serenade: A Derelict's Song

A Modern Cosmic Horror TTRPG Scenario

This guide outlines the core narrative and key encounters for a one-shot or introductory campaign in the Terra Vista setting, focusing on psychological dread, investigation, and the personal cost of confronting the incomprehensible.

The Premise For years, the Starlight Serenade, a once-luxurious ocean liner, has sat abandoned at Pier 17 in the city's bustling port. Its rusted hull and broken windows are a stark contrast to the gleaming, efficient docks of Terra Vista. Locals whisper about it: some say it's a front for smuggling, others claim it's haunted by the ghosts of its last voyage. Despite the rumors, no one is ever found on board, and official investigations always turn up nothing. Recently, however, the whispers have grown louder, fueled by strange lights seen flickering from its portholes at night and a haunting, almost musical hum that seems to emanate from its depths, drawing people to its desolate pier.

The Playable Characters The story features four playable characters, each with a unique reason to be drawn to the Starlight Serenade and two crucial NPCs.

The Urban Explorer

An online content creator specializing in documenting abandoned places. They've heard the rumors and the hum, sensing a viral video opportunity. They have a keen eye for hidden passages and a knack for getting into (and out of) tight spots.

The Marine Historian

A meticulous researcher obsessed with maritime history, particularly the golden age of ocean liners. They've been trying to get access to the Starlight Serenade for years, believing its final voyage holds a forgotten secret. They've noticed anomalies in the ship's official logs.

The Dock Security Guard

A grizzled, world-weary security guard who has worked Pier 17 for decades. They've seen the Starlight Serenade sit empty for years, but recently, they've been experiencing unsettling dreams and hearing faint, impossible music from the ship during their night shifts. They're here to investigate a recent, unexplained power surge at the pier linked to the ship.

The Musician

A talented but struggling musician, often found busking near the docks. They've been captivated by the strange, haunting melody that occasionally drifts from the Starlight Serenade, finding it both beautiful and deeply unsettling. They've started trying to replicate it, but it always leads to discordant, unsettling results.

Key NPCs

Captain Arthur Finch (Deceased/Transformed)

The Starlight Serenade's last known captain. His official fate was a disappearance at sea, but his personal logbook (found on the ship) reveals a descent into madness as he encountered the entity within. His fragmented thoughts and warnings will guide (and

The Harvester (The Ship's Manifestation)

A grotesque, shapeless entity that is the true "life" of the Starlight Serenade. It is not a ghost, but a cosmic intelligence that feeds on consciousness, luring individuals into its depths to absorb their minds. It can manifest as fleeting shadows, impossible reflections, or a pervasive sense of dread.

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Act I: The Siren's Call

Scene: Pier 17, Dusk

The story opens just as dusk settles over Terra Vista's port. It's a quiet evening, with the usual hum of distant city life. The players find themselves drawn to Pier 17, the desolate dock where the Starlight Serenade looms, a hulking silhouette against the fading light. Each character has arrived for their own reasons, but a shared, subtle phenomenon has pulled them together: a low, resonant hum that seems to emanate from the ship, accompanied by a faint, haunting melody that only they seem to truly perceive.

As they glance at each other, there's a shared look of curiosity and unease. The air around the ship feels unnaturally still, a pocket of quiet amidst the bustling port. The melody from the ship seems to grow subtly louder, beckoning them closer.

Encourage players to describe their characters' initial reactions to the ship and their fellow, unknown individuals.

Prompt initial awkward interactions. "Did you hear that?" or "Are you here about the ship too?"

Event: The Shifting Gangplank

As the players approach the Starlight Serenade, they notice a rusted gangplank, seemingly unsecured, leading up to a service hatch. As they cautiously step onto it, the gangplank groans and shifts, then subtly elongates and twists behind them, sealing the service hatch with a metallic clang. They are now on the ship, and the way back is gone.

Call for a Stability Check from each player. This is a crucial moment for establishing the core mechanic of the game.

Results of the Stability Check:

Passing the Check: For this player, the gangplank's movement is unsettling but explicable (e.g., a gust of wind, old machinery). The hatch clicks shut, but seems merely latched. They feel a surge of adrenaline but remain grounded.

Failing the Check: For this player, the gangplank visibly distorts and writhes like a living thing, stretching beyond its normal length before snapping back into place. The hatch melds with the hull, becoming seamless, as if it was never there. They experience a terrifying, disorienting moment of reality warping, feeling a profound sense of isolation and dread.

Emphasize the sensory details for players who fail the check: the impossible movement, the feeling of the ship "swallowing" the entrance.

For players who passed, describe the immediate need for action – they're trapped, and the ship is clearly not what it seems.

Regardless of individual results, the sealed entrance forces the group to interact and react, as they are now trapped together on the ship.

Event: The Echoing Hallways

Now trapped, the players find themselves in a dimly lit, decaying corridor of the Starlight Serenade. The air is thick with the smell of salt, rust, and something else – a faint, cloying sweetness. The haunting melody from outside is now stronger, seeming to emanate from the very walls.

As they try to find their way, they hear a faint, distorted cry for help, echoing from deeper within the ship. It sounds like a human voice, but it's layered with the ship's strange melody, making it sound both desperate and strangely alluring.

Call for a second Stability Check from each player to see how they perceive this sound.

Results of the Second Stability Check:

Passing the Check: The player hears a clear, though faint, human cry for help. It sounds genuinely distressed, prompting them to investigate. They are grounded enough to accept that someone might be in trouble on the ship.

Failing the Check: For this player, the cry for help is deeply unsettling. It sounds less like a human voice and more like a mimicry, a series of distorted, musical notes forming a sound that resembles a cry. They might perceive impossible echoes or feel a strange, psychic pull towards the source, as if the ship itself is trying to lure them. The rift in their perception grows wider. Is the cry real, or is it a trap?

The cry for help will lead them towards the ship's main lounge or dining hall, where they will find the first major clue.

This is the moment the players must decide to trust each other and pursue the mystery deeper into the ship.

Act II: The Ship's Unholy Heart

Having followed the unsettling cry, the players are led deeper into the Starlight Serenade. The ship's interior is a labyrinth of decaying grandeur and impossible anomalies. The pervasive melody now feels like a physical presence, vibrating through the deck plates.

Scene: The Grand Lounge

The cry leads them to the ship's once-opulent Grand Lounge, now a scene of unsettling disarray. Furniture is overturned, dust motes dance in the shafts of light from broken portholes, and the air is heavy with the cloying sweet scent. There's no one here. The cry was a lure.

The most terrifying sight is a series of intricate, unhinged carvings and drawings etched into the polished wood panels and velvet upholstery. These aren't random scribbles; they are meticulous, deliberate depictions of impossible geometry and swirling, tentacled forms, all centered around a large, crudely carved symbol on the floor. The carvings pulsate with a faint, internal light, synchronized with the ship's melody.

Describe the scene with vivid, unsettling detail. Emphasize the smell, the visceral nature of the carvings, and the unsettling patterns.

Stability Check: Players should make a Stability Check upon entering the room, or after spending a few minutes absorbing the horror. The sheer strangeness and the pervasive melody will take a toll.

Clues in the Decay

Amidst the chaos, the players can find crucial clues that advance the story and give them insight into the ship's true nature and the fate of its last crew.

Captain's Logbook: A leather-bound logbook, water-damaged but still legible, is found hidden beneath a collapsed table. It belongs to Captain Arthur Finch. His early entries are routine, but they quickly devolve into frantic, unhinged ramblings. He talks about a "song from the deep," a "beautiful hum" that changed the crew, and how the ship itself was "waking up." He mentions strange dreams, missing crew members, and a growing obsession with "the patterns." His final entries are desperate warnings about "the Harvester" and how it "feeds on thought," urging anyone who finds the log to "stop the music."

Skill Check: Investigation checks can help players decipher the logbook's increasingly chaotic entries.

The Navigator's Chart: In the nearby navigation room, a large, old chart of the ship's final voyage is found. It shows the Starlight Serenade veering wildly off course, not towards any known port, but into an uncharted, impossibly deep trench. Scrawled over the trench, in Arthur Finch's hand, is the same symbol found carved on the lounge floor, and the words "The Heart of the Song."

Skill Check: Navigation or Research checks to understand the chart's implications and the significance of the trench.

The Ship's "Veins": As players explore, they notice that the ship's pipes, wires, and even structural beams seem to be subtly shifting, pulsing with a faint, organic light, almost like veins. The pervasive melody seems to flow through these "veins," growing stronger as they move deeper into the ship. The ship is not merely abandoned; it's a living, breathing entity, slowly reconfiguring itself.

Skill Check: Perception or Engineering checks to notice the unnatural nature of the ship's internal structure.

This scene confirms that the Starlight Serenade is not merely haunted but is a vessel for a cosmic horror. The clues point directly to the ship's engine room or its deepest, submerged levels as the next, and likely final, destination.

Act III: The Harvester's Symphony

The final act brings the players to the deepest, most inaccessible part of the Starlight Serenade—the Engine Room, or perhaps an even deeper, submerged chamber accessible only through flooded corridors. This is the source of the pervasive hum and the haunting melody. The ship's impossible geometry is now a tangible reality. The walls pulse with a sickly, organic light, the air smells of dust, ozone, and something indescribably alien and metallic. The strange, alien carvings from the lounge are now everywhere, glowing with an unnatural, pulsating light.

At the center of it all is the Harvester, the true “life” of the Starlight Serenade. It is not a creature in the traditional sense, but a vast, amorphous mass of impossible biology, shimmering light, and swirling consciousness, manifesting as a grotesque parody of an engine, constantly shifting and expanding. Its form is a writhing mass of impossible biology and tentacles, constantly shifting, with eyes that seem to see into other dimensions. Its voice, when it speaks, is a distorted chorus of Arthur Finch’s pleas, the lost crew’s screams, and the guttural whispers of an elder god, all woven into the ship’s haunting melody. It is desperately trying to complete its “symphony” – to fully absorb all consciousness within the ship and then extend its influence to the city.

Describe the scene with as much sensory detail as possible to maximize dread. The sounds, smells, and impossible visuals should overwhelm the players.

Stability Check: Players should make a Stability Check upon witnessing the Harvester’s manifestation.

The Confrontation

The confrontation isn’t a simple “kill the monster” scenario. The Harvester is an entity beyond human comprehension, a force of nature that simply is. The goal is to stop its “symphony” and sever its connection to the ship and potentially the city, preventing it from consuming more minds.

The players must use the clues they’ve gathered throughout the story—from Arthur Finch’s logbook, the Navigator’s chart, and the ship’s “veins”—to figure out how to disrupt the Harvester’s ritual. This might involve:

Disrupting the Melody: The Musician might find a way to play a discordant counter-melody, or use their knowledge of sound to create a frequency that disrupts the Harvester’s influence.

Severing the Veins: The Urban Explorer might find a way to physically sever the ship’s “veins” or internal conduits, cutting off the Harvester’s connection to the surface world.

Destroying the Heart: The Marine Historian might decipher a way to target the Harvester’s core, perhaps by understanding its alien biology or the specific weaknesses mentioned in Arthur Finch’s log.

Overloading the System: The Dock Security Guard might find a way to overload the ship’s remaining power systems, creating a surge that disrupts the Harvester’s energy field.

This is a multi-stage encounter. It should combine elements of combat (against lesser manifestations or the ship’s defenses), puzzle-solving, and roleplaying.

Skill Checks:

Combat: For direct engagement with the Harvester's manifestations or the ship's defenses.

Investigation/Research: To interpret the logbook and chart, finding the Harvester's weakness.

Dexterity/Agility: To navigate the shifting, impossible environment of the engine room.

Stability Checks: Ongoing checks as the horror intensifies and the Harvester's whispers or the collective cries of its victims assail their minds.

The Harvester's "symphony" – a blend of beautiful melody, human cries, and alien whispers – should be a constant, haunting presence throughout the confrontation.

Emphasize the personal stakes: the players are fighting for their own minds and the potential fate of the city.

The Stakes

If the players fail, the Starlight Serenade will become a beacon, broadcasting the Harvester's "symphony" across Terra Vista, slowly lulling the city's population into a state of perfect, blissful assimilation. The city will not be destroyed, but its collective consciousness will be consumed, becoming a single, vast, undifferentiated mind, a part of the Harvester's endless, alien awareness. The outcome will forever alter their perception of reality.

Aftermath: The Silence and the Echo

Assuming the players succeed in disrupting the Harvester's symphony and severing its connection, they emerge from the Starlight Serenade, bruised, battered, and forever changed.

Scene: The Silent Ship and the Arrival of Authority

The Starlight Serenade is now truly silent. The hum is gone, the melody has ceased, and the internal lights have flickered out. The impossible geometry has receded, but the ship is a ruin, scorched and decaying, with an eerie stillness. The Harvester's manifestation has collapsed into an inert, grotesque mass—no longer a threat, but undeniably alien.

As the players stumble out onto Pier 17, they hear the blare of sirens. The port authority, alerted by the commotion (perhaps a panicked dockworker, or a security alarm triggered by the disruption), are swarming the pier. They find the players covered in dust, possibly grime, and standing amidst an inexplicable scene of destruction within the ship.

Storyteller Notes:

This is a moment for roleplaying the immediate aftermath. How do the players explain what happened? Do they try to cover it up, or do they tell a version of the truth?

Skill Checks:

To convince authorities of a plausible (or implausible) story.

To treat their own wounds.

The authorities will be baffled. They'll likely attribute the damage to structural collapse, an elaborate act of vandalism, or even a gas leak, unwilling or unable to comprehend the true nature of the events. The players might be questioned extensively, but ultimately, there's no logical explanation for what occurred. The Starlight Serenade will likely be towed away and scrapped, its secrets buried.

Scene: The Lingering Melody

Days or weeks later, life in Terra Vista slowly returns to its "perfect" normal. The Starlight Serenade is gone, a forgotten incident. But for the players, the silence is deafening. They might occasionally catch a faint, almost imperceptible echo of the Harvester's melody, lingering at the edge of their hearing, especially in moments of quiet or stress.

Storyteller Notes:

This scene offers a moment for reflection and emotional processing for the players.

Allow players to roleplay their characters' reactions to the city's return to normalcy and the public's ignorance of the truth.

The lingering melody should be a constant, subtle reminder of what they faced, a psychological scar.

The Future: Life, Unraveling

The players have survived, but they haven't escaped. Their encounter with the Harvester and the unraveling of reality has left an indelible mark. They are no longer just ordinary people. They've glimpsed the true weirdness beneath the veneer of modern life, and that knowledge is a heavy burden.

What do they do now?

The Burden of Knowledge:

They now see the subtle anomalies everywhere: a flickering streetlamp that seems to pulse with an unnatural rhythm, a distorted reflection in a shop window, a momentary glitch in their smart devices that echoes the ship incident. The world feels wrong. The "perfect" harmony of Terra Vista now feels like a fragile illusion, constantly threatening to break.

A New Purpose

Do they try to forget, to return to their normal lives, knowing what they know? Or do they embrace this new, terrifying awareness? Do they seek out other anomalies, try to understand more, or perhaps even try to protect others from the creeping cosmic horror?

The Echoes of the Harvester

Players who failed stability checks throughout the adventure might experience recurring nightmares, strange compulsions, or even brief, terrifying visions of impossible realities. The Musician might find themselves unable to play "normal" music, only able to create discordant echoes of the Harvester's song. The Urban Explorer might find themselves drawn to other abandoned places, sensing similar hidden horrors.

Forming a Group

The shared trauma and knowledge have forged an unbreakable, if unsettling, bond between the players. They are the only ones who truly understand what happened. Do they formalize their group, becoming reluctant investigators of the weird, or do they simply remain a support network for each other in a world that feels increasingly alien?

Storyteller Notes:

This section sets the stage for future Terra Vista adventures, allowing you to continue their story as they navigate a world that is "almost perfect," but increasingly sinister.

End the session by asking each player what their character does next, and how this experience has changed them.

The Starlight Serenade: Character Backstories

These notes provide a foundation for each playable character's connection to the Starlight Serenade and their entry into the strange events of The Starlight Serenade: A Derelict's Song.

The Urban Explorer

Name: (Player's Choice)

Profession: Online Content Creator / Urban Explorer

Life, Personality, and Hobbies: You live for the thrill of discovery, the rush of adrenaline that comes from slipping into forgotten spaces. Your YouTube channel, "Hidden City," has a small but dedicated following, built on your daring explorations of abandoned factories, derelict hospitals, and forgotten subway tunnels. You're resourceful, agile, and always have your camera rolling. You're a natural skeptic when it comes to the supernatural, preferring to find the mundane explanations for strange phenomena, but you're also open to anything that makes for good content. Your hobbies include parkour, photography, and collecting odd souvenirs from your expeditions.

News of the Starlight Serenade: You've heard the whispers about the Starlight Serenade for years – the smuggling rumors, the ghost stories. You've always dismissed them as local folklore, but the recent reports of strange lights and that haunting, almost musical hum from the ship caught your attention. It sounded like a unique challenge, a perfect subject for your next viral video. You received an anonymous tip (or saw a cryptic post on a niche urban exploration forum) about "unusual activity" at Pier 17 tonight, specifically mentioning the Starlight Serenade.

Your curiosity, and the lure of new content, led you there, ready to document another forgotten space.

The Marine Historian

Name: (Player's Choice)

Profession: Maritime Researcher / Archivist

Life, Personality, and Hobbies: Your life is spent buried in dusty archives, poring over old ship manifests, captain's logs, and faded photographs. You're meticulous, patient, and possess an encyclopedic knowledge of naval architecture and maritime disasters. You're driven by a desire to uncover forgotten truths and bring history to life. While you appreciate the romance of the sea, you're grounded in facts and evidence. Your hobbies include building intricate ship models, collecting antique nautical instruments, and reading obscure historical accounts.

News of the Starlight Serenade: The Starlight Serenade has been a personal obsession of yours for years. Its final voyage, officially listed as a "disappearance at sea," has always felt incomplete. You've found subtle discrepancies in the official reports and a strange, almost poetic vagueness in the few surviving crew accounts. You believe there's a crucial piece of history missing, something that was deliberately suppressed. The recent reports of strange lights and that pervasive hum from the ship have only intensified your conviction that the answer lies within its decaying hull.

You received an anonymous email (or a tip from a sympathetic contact at the port authority) hinting that "new information" about the Starlight Serenade's final voyage might be accessible tonight at Pier 17. You're here to finally uncover the truth.

The Dock Security Guard

Name: (Player's Choice)

Profession: Port Security Guard

Life, Personality, and Hobbies: You've seen it all working the docks for decades. You're a creature of routine, preferring the predictable rhythms of the port to any surprises. You're gruff but fair, with a deep understanding of the city's underbelly. While you've always dismissed the Starlight Serenade as just another derelict, lately, things have been different. You've been having increasingly vivid, unsettling nightmares of being adrift on a vast, silent ocean, and during your night shifts, you've started hearing a faint, impossible melody drifting from the ship, just at the edge of hearing. You find solace in simple pleasures like a good cup of coffee and watching the ships come and go.

News of the Starlight Serenade: Your shift tonight was supposed to be routine, but then the alarms went off. A massive, unexplained power surge hit Pier 17, originating directly from the Starlight Serenade. It was enough to trip the main breakers and cause a brief blackout in the immediate area. Management wants it investigated quietly, fearing bad publicity. You've been assigned to check it out. You're here because it's your job, but also because that unsettling melody from the ship has been calling to you, and you have a gut feeling that this power surge is connected to the strange things you've been experiencing.

The Musician

Name: (Player's Choice)

Profession: Street Musician / Composer

Life, Personality, and Hobbies: Music is your life. You live for the rhythm, the harmony, the way sound can evoke emotion. You spend your days busking in public squares, playing gigs in small clubs, and composing new pieces in your cramped apartment. You're sensitive, intuitive, and possess a unique ear for subtle nuances in sound. You're drawn to unusual instruments and experimental compositions. Your hobbies include collecting vinyl records, attending open mic nights, and exploring the city's soundscapes.

News of the Starlight Serenade: You've been performing near the docks for a few weeks, and you've become captivated by a strange, haunting melody that occasionally drifts from the Starlight Serenade. It's unlike anything you've ever heard – beautiful, melancholic, and deeply unsettling, almost as if it's being sung by the ship itself. You've tried to capture it, to replicate it on your instruments, but it always ends up sounding discordant, wrong. The melody has started to invade your dreams, and you feel an irresistible pull towards its source.

Tonight, the melody is stronger than ever, almost a physical presence. You're here, drawn by an artistic compulsion, hoping to finally understand and capture the Starlight Serenade's haunting song.

