COURSE: RED

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INTRODUCTION AND SETTING

The Solar System

In the beginning of the 23rd century, Humanity has successfully colonised the Moon ("The Mistress") and Mars ("Red"). The space in between is chock full with satellites ("Shiners"), space-cities ("Bagels", due to their shape), and various stations – research, refuelling, commerce (colloquially "Blocks"). Ships fly back and forth constantly – for business, for pleasure, for both.

Back on Earth, the land is under the control of a vast corporation-like government, the Large Earth Conglomerate. Homo homini lupus est, and those without connections high up are eaten quickly and harshly. The rich are filthy rich, and the poor don't make it long.

The Moon is a penal colony under the control of LEC, its population enclosed under a gigantic glass dome. And since LEC is the only body with the resources to construct such a dome, no other settlements on Moon exist.

Mars is somewhat better. Terraforming operations on Mars began in the first half of the 22nd century, but were later abandoned due to financial concerns and the subsequent formation of LEC. But a team of boyscounts full of ideas and ideals managed to gather the resources required to finish what had been once started in a small region on Mars, where they quickly started to form their New Frontier and Better Future or whatever. The place is harsh and contains little value, and thus doesn't arouse much commercial interest from anyone. For now, at least.

With life on Earth and the Moon as it is, those who can take what little belongings weren't stolen or brutally taken from them, buy a cheap spaceship and take it to space – to become Free Men. Or, as the various governments refer to them, space pirates.

And not that they aren't correct, if only because they have no other choice. Running any sort of legitimate business is all but impossible, since all those are strictly controlled by LEC. This leaves the Free Men only one real way for making a living – that of piracy.

Of course, not all of the Free Men are idealists. And those who began as such quickly became much too bitter for ideals.

The Outbreak

But something has changed. Earlier today, what began as a trickle of fear and suspicion quickly turned into an avalanche of panic: a virus was spreading across the entire Solar System, turning those if afflicted into mindless beasts. Methods of infection aren't clear, and the plague's source isn't clear either. Channels are filled with panic screams and rumours, and little is clear. As far as can be discerned, Earth and the Moon are infected, as are many of the space cities and stations. The rumours also say that Mars is still clear, but that its gates are sealed – no coming in, no coming out.

The Characters

You will play the crew of a single pirate ship. The outbreak finds you somewhere near Earth. You set course towards Mars, in hope that the rumours of it being clean are true and the rumours of its gates being closed re false. But the journey is long, and you haven't got the supplies and fuel required. Which means there will be some stops along the way.

What You'll Need

In order to play you will need the following dice: d4, 2d6, d8, d10, d12. (Other than the 2d6, you'll need only one die of each other type.)

CHARACTER CREATION

Personality

The character's personality is mechanically represented by the answers to 2 questions: **Why I'm Here** and **What I'll Never Do**.

Why I'm Here answers why the character has chosen the life of a Free Man. Some decide to do it because of their ideals: they want to live a just and moral life, as opposed to life on Earth, which they see as corrupt and immoral. Others may be running away from those to whom they own money. Still others may be escaped convicts from the penal colony on Moon. Maybe they are political prisoners. Or maybe they are immoral cut-throats, which couldn't care less for the value of human life or other such nonsense.

What I'll Never Do is pretty much what it sounds like. Every person has borders he will not cross. Or, at least, borders he believes he will not cross. It may be things like "I'll never hurt a child" or "I'll never leave a friend unavenged". It should, however, be a more or less noble emotion – even cut throats have their soft spots. For instance, "I'll never miss an opportunity to earn some money" is not an appropriate answer here.

Skills

Every character has 4 skills, rated Poor (3), Average (6) and Good (9). Every character has one skill at Good, one at Poor and two at Average. The skills are:

Weapons: This skill represents the ability to wield weapons, from knives to rifles to laser guns.

Athletics: This skill is used for fighting unarmed – be it with crude punches or exquisite martial arts – and for doing various feats of athletics.

Charm: This skill helps the character persuade others of what he wants and resolve matters in a more diplomatic and civil manner.

Brains: This skill assists in solving technical and scientific problems, from reprogramming the onboard computer to picking a lock.

ENCOUNTERS

During the game, your ship will have 5 encounters. These are scenes that happen as the ship encounters other ships, stations, cities etc, and in each such scene you will attempt to gather additional supplies to help you in your journey. Scenes that do not involve the gathering of additional supplies are not involved, though the GM may decide to run a few of these in freeform in between the encounters to help flesh out the characters.

Setting up the Encounter

Before the Encounter begins, it is set up. This stage determines all the various attributes of the encounter.

Plague Metre

Roll a die to determine the severity of infection aboard. The first encounter uses a d4, the second a d6, then a d8, d10 and finally d12 for the final encounter. The die size increases to represent the fact that the plague gets worse and worse and the infection spreads. The result on the die tells you just what you will find aboard:

1 – No infection here at all. Lucky you.

2-8 – The vessel is infected, but the infection is still in check, more or less. The sane citizens can keep those infected in check, perhaps even under quarantine.

9-12 – The vessel is overrun. Those who haven't been infected, if there are any, survive by hiding and running away from the infected.

The number itself is also important, and is called the Disease Strength aboard.

Select the Setting

Choose the vessel where the encounter takes place: a space city, a research station, a luxury space-liner or any other piece of metal that floats in space waiting for you to raid it.

What You Want

Your crew has arrived here to get some valuable resources. Each encounter provides the possibility to gather 3 resource points, which represent fuel, food and various other things that can be taken and salvaged for the benefit of your ship and your crew.

You will need to gather 10 resource points in order to get to Mars, so be careful.

Goals

Unless the vessel is overrun, its people will have some goals. Specifically, two goals: a main goal and a secondary goal.

The main goal *always* comes in contradiction to gathering resources. The most common reason is that the ship requires those resources for

themselves, or that it wants you to help with repairs on the ship that take valuable time, etc.

You can help the people with their goal, but the more you help, the less resources you will be able to get. As you might expect, there are three degrees of help – you can not help the people at all and go for the 3 resource points, you can help them a little and go for 2 resource points, you can help them quite a lot and go for only a single resource point, or you can do exactly what they want you to and get no resource points whatsoever.

The secondary goal is an additional goal, which does not incur penalty on the number of resource points you can get, but adds interesting flavour. It can be anything from helping a pregnant woman deliver to wanting revenge on one of the characters.

Flashback

Before beginning the encounter proper, you may decide to do a flashback. At least one flashback during the game is required, additional flashbacks are optional and it's up to the group to decide whether they want one or not.

A flashback takes the group back, to the time before the Outbreak, into a scene where this very vessel (space city, research station, spaceship etc) was raided by the group. They are pirates, after all.

The events of the flashback can then determine the goals of the local crew. For instance, if during the flashback the captain's daughter has been murdered by our team of pirates, then revenge will be a possible secondary goal.

The flashback is played out in free-form, and in it the players portray the local crew – while the usual player characters (the pirates) are portrayed by the GM. The GM may also decide to change the pirate crew somewhat. Perhaps somebody hasn't joined then. Perhaps there was an additional crew member. What happened to him? Maybe he was killed during this very flashback?

The flashback allows the players to get into the shoes of the local crew and flash out their problems and goals so that they feel personal indeed.

Playing out the Encounter

Now that the encounter is all set up, it's ready to be played out. If the vessel is overrun, then the encounter is one of survival horror, and it is a conflict – played out as described further on.

If the vessel isn't overrun, then there's a chance of avoiding any conflict whatsoever. However, there will be a disagreement between the local crew and the characters and the result will be a conflict. With times being as desperate as they are, not agreeing to all of the crew's demands will often result in a conflict. (Resolving things without a conflict isn't very interesting, after all.)

How conflict is resolved will be discussed later. Here we shall only say a word on its difficulty. The conflict's starting difficulty is the number of characters times 3.

For every degree of help with the main goal and for acceptance of the secondary goal, the difficulty goes down by 1. That is, if you agree to help but still go for 1 resource point the difficulty will be reduced by 2. If you also agree to the secondary goal, the difficulty will be reduced by an additional 1, to a total of 3.

CONFLICT

A conflict consists of three rounds: Overture, Suspense and Climax. During each of these rounds, the players will attempt to gain successes. At the end of the conflict, the number of successes that the team has gathered should match or surpass the conflict's difficulty (the guidelines for determining the conflict's difficulty were given previously).

The Rounds of Conflict

During each round, every player gets to attempt to further the team's goal and win the conflict. He chooses how he attempts to do so, using one of his skills, and describes how he uses this skill in order to achieve his goal. The GM sets the Task Difficulty (TD) for this task as he sees fit.

If the player decides not to Raise the Stakes, Take One for the Team or Help a Wounded Friend (see below), then he simply rolls 2d6, adds his character's score in the appropriate skill and compares it to the TD. If his result matched or exceeded the TD, he gets a success. Otherwise, he doesn't.

Basic benchmarks for TDs are given below:

6	Quite easy. Almost everyone can do this without difficulty.
9	Average. With a basic grasp of the subject matter you should have no trouble succeeding.
12	Tricky. You better know what you're doing to have a decent chance of success here.
15	Challenging. Only experts have a decent chance of success.
18	Very difficult. Even the masters of the field will find doing this tough.
21	Insane. Most people wouldn't even believe this is possible.

If a character is doing something which comes in contrast to his "What I'll Never Do", he gets -3 to his roll.

If he does something which aligns with his "Why I'm Here", he gets +3 to his roll.

These bonuses and penalties can only apply once per conflict.

Consequences of Failing

If the character has failed in his roll, he may take damage for it. The rule of thumb is that failing in using Charm or Brains doesn't incur damage, failing in Athletics incurs 1 point of damage and failing in Weapons incurs 2 points of damage. However, the GM may decide otherwise, depending on the situation.

If a character has suffered 5 points of damage, he is dead.

Raising the Stakes

When taking his action during the conflict, after The GM has stated the TD, a player may choose to increase the TD in order to gain additional successes. By Raising the Stakes, the player voluntarily increases the TD of the action. The TD may be increased by multiples of 3, and if the player succeeds in the task with the new and increased TD, he gains an additional success for every 3 points by which he raised the stakes.

In order to gain the successes, the player must match or exceed the new, increased TD. The old TD becomes irrelevant. For instance, if the old TD was 10, and the player decided to raise it to 16, aiming for 3 successes, but eventually rolled 15 – he gets nothing. Not even a single success.

Failing after raising the stakes incurs more damage than usual. For every 3 points of raising the stakes, an additional point of damage is sustained (if damage is to be applied in the situation to begin with, of course.)

In the example above, if the character was using Weapons, he would sustain 4 points of damage – 2 for the fact he was using Weapons, and an additional point for each 3 points by which he raised the TD. Almost enough to kill him outright.

Taking One for the Team

Just like with Raising the Stakes, the player may choose instead to increase the TD for his roll in order to add that much to the next roll of one of his comrades. For instance, a player may increase the TD from 8 to 11, and in the next roll, another player specified by him will get a bonus of +3 for his roll, whatever it is. The player must succeed in the roll for the bonus to have an effect, but here it doesn't matter if the team wins eventually or not. Also, you may only increase the TD by multiples of 3 – you cannot increase it by 2 to give another player a bonus of +2.

The rules for additional damage apply here as well.

Helping a Wounded Friend

An additional way to increase the TD for some benefit is to attempt to heal wounded team mates. For each 3 points by which you raise the TD you may heal one damage point in one of your team mates. You can only help one other character at a time, however – you can heal 2 points of damage of one character by raising the TD by 6, but you cannot heal 1 point in one character and 1 point in another.

The rules for additional damage apply here as well.

When you raise your TD, you may distribute the points between Raising the Stakes, Taking One for the Team and Helping a Wounded Friend in any way you wish.

The Move of the Diseased

If the vessel is infected, then at the end of each round, the GM rolls the dice for the diseased on board. He rolls 2d6 and adds the Disease Strength aboard. All characters who have failed their roll in this round with a result lower than this roll sustain a single point of damage.

Outcome

If the team won the conflict, then they got the resource points they need – otherwise, they didn't, and will have to try hard to get resources elsewhere.

All characters heal 2 points of damage between encounters.

ENDGAME

If by the end of the fifth encounter the characters have succeeded in gathering 10 resource points, then they have enough fuel and food and their ship is in a good enough condition to get them to Mars.

And what's actually going on on Red? Well, that's up to you to decide…