

## Ashen Stars: Background

They call you Lasers. Or Envoys, Lancers, Regulators, or, out in the Scylla Outzone, Shinestars. To the lawless denizens of the Bleed, whether they be pirates, gangsters or tyrants, you're known in less flattering terms. According to official Combine terminology set by the Ministry of Settlement, the members of your hard-bitten starship crew are known as Licensed Autonomous Zone Effectuators. You're the seasoned freelancers local leaders call when a situation proves too tough, too baffling or simply too weird to handle on their own. In the abandoned fringe of inhabited planets known as the Bleed, you're as close to a federal authority as they come.

The Bleed wasn't always the untamed fringe it is today. Less than a generation ago, it was the glamorous frontier of an interstellar, culture-spanning government dedicated to peace, understanding and self-determination. The Combine, an amalgamation of interstellar empires that has stood for more than two centuries, had achieved its apex. With humanity at the forefront, its united peoples expanded throughout the dense belt of solar systems then known as the Wave. Sleek, generously-manned star vessels patrolled its FTL corridors, keeping the peace, confronting anomalies, and solving problems. Shielded by their universal ideology of cooperation, the peoples of the Wave slumbered safe in their beds.

Then came the Mohilar War. For the first time in a century, the Combine faced an enemy strong enough to threaten its very existence. The Mohilar arose suddenly on planets throughout Combine space which were thought to be uninhabitable. Due to a bizarre psychic effect dubbed The Conundrum, memories of the Mohilar race have grown indistinct and contradictory, even though the last of them vanished less than a decade ago. But what they did is remembered all too well.

Mastering a strange and incompatible material technology they roused vast war fleets, attacking without warning or mercy on a rampage through Combine space. The atmospheres of its core planets, including Earth, were irreparably poisoned. Billions of civilians died, on both sides. Industrial production flat-lined, provoking economic collapse in a society that had transcended the need for currency. The Combine's glittering fleets of patrol vessels, pressed into unfamiliar service as military ships, were largely destroyed.

Seven years ago, the war ended. After suffering a surprise defeat in a decisive last-ditch engagement at Myndaro Station, the Mohilar abruptly vanished. Fears of their return remain high. In the meantime, a reconstituted, decentralized Combine has begun the tortuous process of rebuilding its economy, government, and war fleet.

Barely able to administer its surviving core worlds, the Combine has abandoned central control over its far-flung frontiers. More than any other sector, the once-proud Bleed has been left largely on its own. Combine vessels venture here only in direst emergency, usually to investigate signs of a possible Mohilar resurgence. The Bleed's various planets are now essentially autonomous, though united by a common currency and various economic and cultural ties, and the old duties of Combine patrols are now outsourced to private contractors like you.

- The eerily beautiful, nature-loving, emotion-fearing **balla**.
- The **cybes**, former humans radically altered by cybernetic and genetic science.
- The **durugh**, hunched, furtive, one-time enemies of the Combine who can momentarily phase through solid matter.
- The **humans**, adaptable, resourceful, and numerous. They comprise the majority of a typical laser crew.
- The **kch-thk**, warrior locust people who can migrate to new bodies when their old ones are destroyed.
- The armadillo-like **tavak**, followers of a serene warrior ethic but given to bouts of terrible, violent rage.
- The **vas mal**, former near-omniscient energy beings mysteriously and unexpectedly devolved into misshapen humanoid form.