ALL THE JUSTICE CREDITS CAN BUY

They call you **Lasers.** Or scrubbers, 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, 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.

Sometimes that's not saying much. Nearly any planetsider can tell you a horror story of effectuators gone wrong. Motivated by profit and operating on razor-thin margins, laser crews are all too tempted to cross the line, to become the kind of scum they're paid to hunt. You may despise the crooked contractors who give your profession a bad name and make it harder to win the trust of honest citizens. Or you might be hanging on the edge of corruption yourselves. However deep your ethical commitments, you struggle to maintain at least the appearance of a sparkling reputation. The value of your next contract depends on it.

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 founded two centuries ago, 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 patroled 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 Bogey Conundrum, memories of the Mohilar race have grown indistinct and contradictory, even though the last of them vanished less than a decade ago. 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. They rampaged through Combine space. The atmospheres of its core planets, including Earth, were irreparably poisoned. Billions of civilians died, on both sides. Industrial production flatlined, 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.

The old duties of Combine patrols are now outsourced to private contractors like you.

You may cruise around the spacelanes waiting to respond to emergency distress calls. This activity, known as "swooping", is looked down on by higher-end lasers, who pick

and choose their missions. Through this procedure, a distress call is routed through a Combine outpost. The outpost then sends a proffer to all registered laser ships within hailing range. Each ship bids on the contract. The Combine authorizes the winner to proceed to the site of the call and solve whatever problem the locals report. The bid system takes into account the reputations of the bidding vessels, giving the scrubbers incentive to keep it honest. Or what passes for honest in the Bleed.

what you did in the war

Sooner or later, players will want to establish what their PCs did during the war. You might choose to start with this decision and envision your character around it, or find a likely answer after establishing other facts about your laser, for example crew position, species, and or drive. Your wartime activities might explain how you gained the training that made you the ultra-competent problem-solver you are today. The list is not exclusive; players are free to find answers that don't appear on it.

- ► Fought the Mohilar as a member of the Combine fleet

- ► Fought planetside as an infantry soldier or officer in Combine forces
- ► Fought in local militia
- ► Fought Mohilar invaders as irregular or partisan
- ► Saw action while serving in non-combat or support role, for example as medical officer or military policeman
- ► Served as civilian in Combine administration; positions might range from high (Assembly Command) to low (local government in a Bleed backwater)
- ► Bribed or finagled your way out of military service
- ► Called up for duty but granted conscientious objector status
- ► Deemed medically unfit for military service
- ► Imprisoned as a criminal or deserter
- ► Served war effort as scientific researcher, developing anything from weapons to new battlefield cures
- ► Spent the war hospitalized for a debilitating but now-cured condition, physical or mental, possibly caused by Mohilar bioweapons
- ► Too young to fight (and are therefore a young adult today)
- ► Trained to fight, but stationed planetside in obscure location and saw no action
- ► Worked as civilian in a crucial industry
- ► Was a swirling energy being untethered from limited notions of space, time and causation (standard answer for all Vas Mal.)

CREATING YOUR CREW

As the group invents the player characters who star in its Ashen Stars series, you'll be referencing various chapters of this book. GUMSHOE character creation is a collaborative effort of the entire group. The process breaks down into eight steps.

One: Choose Species

Refer to "The Seven Peoples", starting on p. 15, to decide which of the major spacefaring races your character hails from:

- ► The eerily beautiful, nature-loving, emotion-fearing balla.
- ► The cybes, former humans radically altered by cybernetic and genetic science.

POCKET TIMELINE

It is the year 2468.

7 years ago, in 2461, the Mohilar War ended.

17 years ago, in 2451, the Mohilar War began.

206 years ago, the Combine formed, in the halcyon year 2262.

276 years ago, in the wondrous and awful year of 2192, humanity encountered its first sentient alien species, the tavak, and promptly went to war with them.

330 years ago, in 2138, humankind discovered the secrets of faster-than-light travel and began to colonize other planets.

A detailed history starts on p. 157.

ACCESSIBLE FRESHNESS

The Ashen Stars setting pursues a balance between the new and the recognizable that is essential to successful space opera roleplaying.

Nods to beloved genre themes and imagery provide players with the baseline of familiarity they need to orient themselves. Keying from these elements, they can make reasonable guesses about the sorts of actions their characters ought to be taking when faced with the game's mysteries and challenges. On top of this necessary accessibility we layer offbeat elements to keep the experience fresh and a little bit strange. For example, wetware and cyberware technology are not commonly thought of as space opera elements, because they entered the SF lexicon generations relatively recently. Their pervasive use in this setting adds an outward dash of alien-ness to even its human characters.

In dusting the enjoyably familiar with a thin coat of strangeness, we're helping you follow today's most common and effective pop culture strategy. The most successful properties dare to be simple. They drink deep from the well of classic storytelling. They put just enough of a spin on their time-honored devices to let us see past their debt to what has gone before. Call it the willing suspension of originality.

We might smirk when we spot a borrowed or repurposed element summoned from the space opera collective consciousness. It is a weird duality of the geek tribe that we relentlessly condescend to the entertainment we nonetheless love.

Deprive us of our genre touchstones, however, and we feel confused or cheated. In roleplaying we especially need these shared assumptions; they're the building blocks, the shorthand, from which collaborative narrative springs.

The setting earns its homages by commenting on the themes of the genre. Most notably, its core theme is the conflict between utopianism and bitter reality, and who we become when we have to choose between the two.

Within any given group you'll find different levels of attraction to core genre elements. GMs can adjust their portrayal of the Ashen Stars setting to match their responses. This is a tricky and ongoing process. Some players think in genre tropes. A few really want a wholly unfamiliar world. Most think they want more originality than they really do. For a group with avowedly classical tastes, you can throw in constant, thinly disguised hat tips to classic TV shows and movies. In other groups you might need to scrub out anything that seems like a reference or recapitulation of something they already know.

► The durugh, hunched, furtive ex-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 migrate to new bodies when their old ones are destroyed.
► The armadillo-like tavak, followers of a serene warrior ethic.
► The vas mal, former near-omniscient energy beings devolved by disaster into misshapen humanoid form.

Two: Assign Crew Packages

As seen on p. 28 most lasers fulfill at least one role warpside (on the ship), plus at least one role while breaking cases groundside (on the various planets you visit.) During this step the players parcel out these responsibilities between them. Crew packages give you the basic abilities you need to perform these tasks:

► Warpside: Communications, Pilot, Strategic Coordinator, Systems, Weapons
► Groundside: Cultural, Operations, Survey, Security, Technical
► Mixed: Medical

Three: Choose the Rest Of Your Investigative Abilities

Investigative abilities are central to any GUMSHOE character; they enable you to gather information and drive the plot forward. You get a number of build points to spend on them, as determined by the size of the player group:

# Of Players	Investigative Build Points
2	36
3	28
4	24
5+	21

As the name suggests, investigative build points can only be spent on investigative abilities. One rating point in an ability costs one build point. There is no extra cost to buy the first rating point in any ability. Each crew package costs a certain number of build points; start by deducting these from your total.

The GM then leads the group through the list of investigative build points, ensuring that each one of them is covered by at least one member of the crew *.

Once all of the abilities are covered, you are permitted, if you desire, to reserve any remaining build points to spend as situations arise during play. You may assign yourself additional abilities, or increase your ratings in the ones you've chosen, as seems appropriate to your character and the situations she finds herself in. When you choose to do this, you are not suddenly acquiring abilities on the spot, but simply revealing for the first time what the character has been able to do all along.

Your choice of race gives you advantages, called boosts, on certain abilities, so you'll probably want to pick these up if they weren't in your crew packages.

The abilities are as follows. Special abilities are available only to vas mal characters. Unlike the other investigative abilities, your group can function perfectly well without them.

RATINGS AND POOLS

The number you assign to each ability is called a rating. Although you may improve it gradually over time, ratings remain static over the course of the typical game session.

For each ability your character has a pool of points, which fluctuates over the course of each session. You begin each case, or scenario, with pool points equal to your rating. You might then immediately spend some of them during a prelude phase to the investigation itself. You will definitely spend points as you conduct the investigation. At times your pool may increase, sometimes refreshing to equal its rating again.

The distinction between ratings and pools is a crucial one; keep it in mind as you read and interpret the GUMSHOE rules.

*   Provided that someone takes History (Combine), it's okay, if not optimal, to skip the species-oriented history abilities. At any rate, you'll probably want to take the history of your species, especially if you're playing a non-human.

INVESTIGATIVE ABILITIES

Academic

Anthropology

Archaeology

Botany

Cybe Culture

Forensic Accounting

Forensic Psychology

Geology

History, Balla

History, Combine

History, Durugh

History, Human

History, Kch-Thk

History, Tavak

Law

Linguistics

Vas Mal Culture

Xenoculture

Zoology

Interpersonal

Bullshit Detector

Bureaucracy

Cop Talk

Downside

Flattery

Flirting

Impersonate

Inspiration

Interrogation

Intimidation

Negotiation

Reassurance

Respect

Technical

Astronomy

Bio Signatures

Chemistry

Data Retrieval

Decryption

Energy Signatures

Evidence Collection

Explosive Devices

Forensic Anthropology

Forensic Engineering

Holo Surveillance

Imaging

Industrial Design

Kinetics

Virology

Special (Vas Mal)

Consciousness Simulation

Dreamsight

Neurosight

Timesight

General

Athletics

Business Affairs

Communications Intercept

Emotion Suppression (Balla)

Enhancement Integration (Cybe)

Farsight (Vas Mal)

Filch

Ground Craft

Health

Helm Control

Infiltration

Medic

Migrate Consciousness (Kch-Thk)

Naval Tactics

Neural Rewiring (Cybe)

Pathway Amplification (Vas Mal)

Phase (Durugh)

Preparedness

Probability Override (Vas Mal)

Psychic Vitality (Vas Mal)

Public Relations

Scuffling

Sense Trouble

Shooting

Battle Console

Shuttle Craft

Surveillance

Systems Design

Systems Repair

Viro Manipulation

INTERPERSONAL ABILITIES AFFECT YOUR PERSONALITY

The interpersonal abilities you choose—and perhaps more to the point, the ones you skip—say something about your character's demeanor and behavior. When your rating in an ability is 0, you can never get information or other benefits by using that persuasive tactic. So if you, as the player, are convincingly buttering up a contact but then have no Flattery to back that up, you can't succeed. This reveals something about his ability to impress his personality on others.

How this expresses itself is up to you. Having no Flattery, for example, might suggest that:

➤ you're a lousy liar

➤ you're too tongue-tied to let loose a flow of soothing compliments

➤ you can't stand to cater to others' transparent emotional needs

➤ egotism forbids you from shining the spotlight on anyone but yourself

➤ you're not empathetic enough to tell what those needs might be

Likewise, a Bullshit Detector of 0 might imply that you're gullible, bad at reading subtle emotional cues or prefer to take people at face value.

Intimidation 0 could suggest that you're not particularly scary, that you dislike leaning on people, or that you're so frightening that witnesses freeze up in your presence.

You can work out the implications of your interpersonal ability choices in advance. Or you can wait until your use of, or lack of, an ability comes up in play, and then explore how that manifests itself in your actual behavior.

GENERAL ABILITY BENCHMARKS

Where any points at all in any investigative ability implies a high degree of competence, spreads in general abilities cover a wider range of capability levels. A rating of 1-3 indicates that the ability is a sideline. 4-7 is solid but not off the charts. 8 or more suggests a dedicated bad-assery that will be immediately apparent to observers when they see you in action.

When you choose to have ratings of 0 in certain basic abilities, you're defining your character. An Athletics of 0 implies a surprising feebleness and lack of coordination for a laser. A Health of 1 puts you on the constant verge of hospitalization.

Four: Choose the Rest Of Your General Abilities

General abilities help you survive while you're gathering information and solving problems. You get 75 general build points to spend on them, from which you deduct the cost of the general abilities from your crew package(s.) Every character starts with a Health rating of 1. Like investigative abilities, 1 build point buys you 1 rating point. Unlike investigative abilities, it isn't a game-breaker if certain abilities are left off the crew's collective ability list. The list of general abilities appears below. Some abilities are only available to members of a given species: if so, the species name appears in brackets after the ability name. General points can only be spent on General abilities.

Although there is no set cap on abilities, your second highest general ability rating must be at least half that of your highest rating.

As with investigative abilities (above), you're free to set some build points aside to add to your character during play as the need arises.

Five: Choose Your Drive

Each crew member follows a drive, a personal motivation giving him, her or it good reason to act heroically and curiously. By following your drive, you keep the story moving and ensure that your behavior is in keeping with the space opera genre. The

drives, explained in greater detail starting on p. 53, are as follows. When a species name appears in brackets after the drive name, the drive applies only to that species.

Altruism	Atonement
Avenger	Bleedism
Civilizer	Chronicler
Combinism	Comradeship
Derring-Do	Entrepreneurial
Exploration	Faith
Family Tradition	Footloose
Hotshot	Hunger Tourism (Kch-Thk)
Integrationist (Cybe)	Justice-Seeker
Meditative Reconciliation (Tavak)	Nowhere Else To Go
Phase Rider (Durugh)	Professionalism
Pursued	Programming
Reevolution (Vas Mal)	Role Model
Scientific Inquiry	Self-Exclusion
Sexual Adventure	Social Engineer
Something To Prove	Tech Hound

Six: Choose Your Ship

Together, the players decides on the type of ship their characters fly. When you pick your ship, you'll be choosing the balance of offensive and defensive qualities that best match your group's self-image. Do you want to blaze with firepower or deflect incoming attacks? What weight do you place on speed, against jamming and hacking capacity, against tactical flexibility? You'll also weigh such options as state of repair, cargo space and ongoing upkeep cost. A list of ship types appears here, for more, start on p. 104.

To cut this step short, pick a runner, the default choice of lasers everywhere. It's an all-around performer that neither excels or disappoints in any particular area.

While choosing your ship, you'll collectively decide how your crew came to possess it.

Seven: Choose Tech and Enhancements

The following chart gives you the total budget for all crew members combined, from which they can purchase gear, including cybernetic and viroware enhancements. If you want to buy bolt-ons (p. 115) for later installation on your ship, those fees are also paid for from this budget. You do not pay for the ship itself.

# of Players	Budget
2	72
3	84
4	96
5	108
6	120

Although most groups will divide the bigcreds equally, yours is free to agree to any other arrangement. Players may also collectively decide whether unspent bigcreds remain the personal property of each crew member, or return to the ship's overall budget.

Non-cybe characters may start play with a total of 2 cyber and/or viro enhancements. Cybe characters may start play with up to 7 such enhancements.

To speed up character generation, players may announce how many enhancements they're starting with but leave the specific selections open. To do this, set aside money for future use. You may then decide at any time during play that you've had a particular enhancement all along. When you do so, you spend the money from your reserve. After you run out of reserved money and/or pre-announced enhancement slots, any additional enhancements must be acquired and installed as if new to you, using the improvement rules on p. 126 and 137.

Overenthusiastic purchasing now may require belt-tightening later. Enhancements, like your ship, impose an upkeep cost you must continue to pay over time. Otherwise you lose the use of the enhancements, and may suffer a nasty array of symptoms besides. Basic tech comes at no cost as part of your assumed equipment. For more, start on p. 124.

Eight: Add Personal Details

If you haven't done so already, choose a name for your character. Springboarding from the suggestions on p. 4, figure out what your laser did during the recent war. You can share these facts with other players now, or wait to reveal them during play.

Either before play begins, or after the first session, create a personal arc for your character, as seen at the end of this section. This is a series of brief suggestions your GM will use to weave an ongoing subplot around your character.

Review all of the steps before you get started. You might find a starting hook for your character in a later choice in the list. For example, you might start with a drive and choose your species and crew package to best suit it. Or you might want to play a particular crew position and center all of your other choices around that core concept.

ADDING ADDITIONAL PLAYERS IN MID-SERIES

To add an additional PC to a GUMSHOE game already in progress, assign the same number of investigative build points to the new player as the other players received during character generation. Do not readjust the numbers to reflect the new number of players.

When adding a replacement character, whether played by a replacement player or by the same player in the wake of a previous PC's death or retirement, check the Investigative Ability Worksheet. Highlight the investigative abilities possessed only by the now-absent character. The player of the new character starts by assigning at least 1 build point to each of these abilities. The remaining investigative build points may be spent to increase the ratings of those abilities, or on any other investigative abilities, as the player wishes.

Nine: Note Reputation

As your first episode begins, the crew has already assembled and is assumed to have a modest number of cases to its credit. These past contracts may come into play later, as new episodes refer on the crew's early days as a laser crew.

The general opinion of your crew's honesty and efficiency, as held by those in the business of awarding contracts or purchasing services, is expressed as a Reputation score, which can be either 0, or a negative or positive number. If your Reputation is positive, you'll quickly get new contracts after closing out old ones. Shorter periods between contracts save on upkeep costs, making your operation more profitable. Negative reputations lengthen the periods between contracts, costing you additional upkeep.

Your crew begins play with a Reputation of 0, unless you've chosen to freestripe it (p. 27) in which case it starts at -1.

PERSONAL ARCS

Your personal arc is a narrative hook around which your GM will weave occasional subplots. Over the course of a series, these stories will connect up to deepen, develop, and possibly change your character. Alternately, they might challenge PCs in ways that threaten to change them for the worse. When they overcome these challenges, they prove their heroism by remaining true to their essential selves.

Most contemporary procedural[*] shows use personal arcs to fill out their characters over time. You know the formula even if you haven't thought about it as such. While the full ensemble of characters tackles the problem of the week, the issues raised by that problem take on a particular relevance for one or two of the cast members. The personal story adds emotional impact to the problem of the week. Over time, as new personal stories build on past ones, the viewer sees a broader narrative linking the episodes.

In scriptwriting jargon, the various plotlines interweaving through the course of a given episode are called A-stories and B-stories. Sometimes the character subplot links loosely, if at all, to the problem of the week, in which case it is the B-story to the central mystery's A-story.

In an episode of an imaginary TV series, the crew of the spaceship Brasilia intercede in a civil war between two

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*   In this context, "procedural" refers not to the narrow genre of the police investigative genre, but any show in which a set cast of characters solves a problem of the week. Star Trek in its various iterations, Firefly, and Stargate SG-1 are all examples of space opera procedurals.

seemingly indistinguishable factions of an alien species. Meanwhile, Commander B.O.R.N., in his ongoing attempt to learn what it is to be human, tries to master the subtleties of the trombone.

Another structure keeps the two elements tightly woven; the character's personal goals become a complication making it harder to solve the problem.

Sent to put down an android rebellion on the Planet Xaora, the crew of the Brasilia finds itself at a loss when a strangely reprogrammed Commander B.O.R.N. sides with the revolutionaries.

Generally your GM will look for ways to make your personal arc an additional complication to the central mission driving the episode. When this proves difficult she'll make it a largely separate B-story occurring between problem-solving scenes.

Your Arc Meets the Big Theme

Your task when devising a personal arc is to create an ongoing story idea that allows you to explore your character while easily dovetailing with your laser assignments. The easiest way to do this is to create an arc that fits the overall theme of the game.

Ashen Stars places its central characters in a conflict between altruism and selfishness. This is reflected in its setting, pitting the idealism of a fallen utopian order against the harsh realities of a post-war environment.

As lasers, you are constantly navigating this contradiction, trying to bring justice while also turning a profit. The game reflects this with its all-important Reputation score (p. 165.) When you tilt toward altruism, your Reputation grows. When you give into the many temptations lasers face, your Reputation gets muddied.

Each of the races likewise reflects a conflict between their impulses and their aspirations:

- ► The balla pit their ideal of emotional containment against the reality of their turbulent impulses.
- ► Cybes seek to transcend the limitations of flesh and blood by remaking their bodies. Ironically, the process makes them all the more aware of those limitations.
- ► Some durugh seek acceptance among peoples who recently regarded them as enemies, while others yearn for a return to the power and certainty they felt when they were the Combine's sworn foes.
- ► Humanity's contradictory history has shown its capacity both for enlightened advancement and rapacious exploitation. Will new conditions tip them toward the former, or the latter?

- ► The kch-thk are capable of great self-sacrifice, but also limitless hunger.
- ► The tavak struggle to ground their warrior instincts in a meditative philosophy.
- ► The vas mal used to be near-gods, but are now trapped in vulnerable mortal bodies. Can they re-evolve, or are they doomed to devolution?

You aren't obliged to explicitly link your personal arc to the overall theme.

Submitting Your Arc

Format your arc as follows:

1. A brief sentence or phrase expressing your character's most important goal.
2. (Optional) A second sentence showing how this goal relates to the character's internal conflict between altruism and selfishness.
3. A brief sentence or phrase suggesting an introductory subplot featuring your character.
4. Another subplot that builds on the idea introduced in the previous one.
5. A third subplot concept, again building on the others.

As GM brings your ideas into play, you'll periodically update your arc list to replace them.

Creating Strong Goals

A strong goal is active—it suggests something you'll go out and do. If your goal seems inactive, or about what the character won't do, turn it around. Your character wants something and will, given the opportunity, take action to get it.

The goal can be concrete, or thematic. A concrete goal is specific and material in nature. A thematic goal suggests an inner change or challenge.

Sample concrete goals include:

- ► find my missing sister
- ► learn my true parentage
- ► solve the Bogey Conundrum
- ► cure the rare disease that's killing my wife
- ► return to my home dimension
- ► earn my way back into the Combine navy

Concrete goals imply a conclusive end to your character's arc, often one that will end her participation in the series. Your GM might withhold the goal from you whenever it draws near, to keep the character in the series. She might pace her series so that you have a chance to achieve your goal when it concludes. Or you might, on achieving your goal, find a new one that keeps you aboard the ship.

Thematic goals include:

- ► overcome the odds with maverick confidence
- ► make the Bleed a more rational place
- ► relax my rigid sense of discipline
- ► prove my worth
- ► find new friends, to replace the ones I betrayed
- ► remember you're alive by cheating death

Thematic goals are open-ended. You can achieve them over and over, without changing who you are or why you're serving as a laser.

Whether concrete or thematic, your goal should be charged with meaning and emotion. If you're looking for your missing sister, you have to truly care about her. If your goal is to prove your worth, that has to matter more to you than anything else in this life.

Your goal should match or strongly relate to your drive. Simply restating your drive is perfectly cool; that's what they're there for. If it fits perfectly, just quote the text of your drive description. Otherwise, tweak it until it exactly reflects the laser you want to play. By quoting your drive, you're choosing a thematic goal.

You don't have to tie every sub-plot into your goal. You might design an arc that shifts you from one goal to another, or develops your character in relation to another PCs' goal. However, if you find yourself not wanting to incorporate your goal into sub-plots, it probably isn't as compelling as you thought it was. Take a step back and find a goal that easily suggests a number of stories you really do want to engage with.

Like other creative choices, you can come at this from various angles. You might find it easier to:

- come up with sub-plots first and then find the common goal that ties them together.
- invent a supporting character to whom your PC has an ongoing and turbulent relationship: friend, family member, past or present romantic partner. Then backwards engineer your goal from the contrast between the two characters.
- pick a TV character that resembles yours, rip off a bunch of B-stories relating to that character, then change the details to match this setting instead of the show you're borrowing from.

If your unfamiliarity with the setting of feels like a stumbling block, forget the world stuff for the moment. Focus on an emotionally significant story you'd like to tell through your character. Once you've arrived at this universal human theme or conflict, you can collaborate with the GM to fit it into the basic tropes of space opera, and the specific details of the Bleed. When stumped, describe the arc as it might unfold in our real world, and let the GM translate it into Ashen Stars terms.

Creating Open Subplots

For each of your three subplots, introduce an idea that is specific enough for the GM to latch onto, yet vague and open enough that you'll still be surprised by the way it unfolds. If you're having trouble writing them, find a set of TV listings. Check out the one or two sentence episode summaries for a show you follow. See how they lay out the premise of the episode without revealing its conclusion. That's what you're shooting for here: the basic situation that brings your goal into play and gets your personal story rolling. How it ends up is up to you, the other players and the GM, as you make the story in the course of play.

As examples, here are a few sets of subplot premises arising from some of the goals given above.

Find my sister:

- Someone poses as my sister.
- I run into someone who has one of her possessions.

- I find a survivor who claims to have been aboard her ship when it disappeared.

Return to my home dimension:

- An energy reading seems to emanate from my dimension.
- I glimpse someone who seems to belong to an enemy species from my dimension.
- The case brings us into contact with a psychiatrist who claims my belief in a home dimension is delusional.

Make the Bleed more rational:

- We encounter a race or subculture who take rationality to irrational lengths.
- I am given a chance to save many lives by harsh and cold-blooded means. Can I go through with it?
- We deal with a pathogen that strips away all but the most primal of emotions

Prove my worth:

- the victim of the week is the hard-assed instructor who flunked me from helm school
- to solve the case we need the help of my disapproving uncle, who wants me back on the ion farm
- a scandalcast journalist writes a profile that's supposed to boost the crew's image, but I keep making us look bad.

Write your suggestions so that they draw out your story over time. This is especially important when your goal is a concrete one. If your goal is to find your sister, your first subplot idea can't be "I find my sister", because that burns through your goal immediately. If you can't see a way to slowly develop your goal, go back and pick one that can be teased out in increments.

Your GM may collaborate with you to clarify or modify your ideas, so that she can understand them, and fit them in with the other arcs.

How Sub-Plots Get Implemented

After an introductory episode or two, in which the crew as a whole is established, the GM starts bringing in personal subplots. Typically, each player will get a subplot until everyone has had one. Then the GM will start over. To preserve surprise, she may vary the order from each round of subplots. Often the order will vary itself naturally as the GM adjusts for player absences.

GM guidance for personal arcs appears on p. 217.

Hosers Get Hosed

Personal arcs are a vehicle for you to transmit story requests to your GM. They don't allow you to circumvent the rules to get more stuff for your character or ship or to secure other unearned benefits. If you try, you may discover that you have a sympathetic GM. This GM will work with you to remove your attempt to hose the rules, and find an equivalent idea that does fit the spirit of the concept.

On the other hand, you might find that you have a cunning GM, who gives you what you want, and then uses it as a way of getting you into trouble. In the end, you'll face this interesting trouble, only to have the advantage you were looking for yanked away from you.

Think of how often TV episodes flirt with plot developments which, if followed to their logical conclusion, would end the premise of the show. By the end of the episode, unless it's the finale, the status quo returns. This is what might happen when your GM runs with what seems like a hose attempt on your part.

So if your subplot idea is: "We get a bigger, better-armed and defended ship," you'll get it perhaps for the length of the episode, only to see it blown up, confiscated, or donated to needy orphans.

If your idea is, "I achieve godhood," it happens only briefly, and you then discover that the hangover from apotheosis is a bitch.

FREEDOM, SKEEVINESS & SYMPATHY

The Ashen Stars setting is designed to address the recurring problems of space opera roleplaying.

Classic space opera settings are hard to translate to roleplaying because they usually organize their ensemble casts along military or quasi-military lines. Chains of command make for clear fictional storytelling, but disrupt the joint decision-making that is the hallmark of an RPG session. Ashen Stars removes this issue by making its protagonists freelance law enforcers who organize themselves cooperatively.

The same people who enjoy the ultra-optimistic worldview of shows like Star Trek tend to chafe at the high virtue expected of their heroes when they sit down at the gaming table.

Ashen Stars posits a utopian future, and then scuffs it up and places it in the immediate past. Its fraying post-utopia licenses players to explore the shady, self-interested or irresponsible characters they so often gravitate towards.

At the same time, it introduces a mechanism to keep this tendency from going so far that it stops being fun. Players often want their fictional surrogates to behave skeevily—until they inevitably step over the line into outright nastiness, and become too unsympathetic to play. Our innate sense of story rebels when our central characters consistently engage in unredeemed selfishness and face no comeuppance. By quantifying, and giving the players reason to worry about, their crew's Reputation, the game maintains the balance between enjoyable roguishness and revolting transgression.

We'll revisit this issue when we get to the Reputation rules.