

Ashen Stars: Terminology

The Combine: Formed just over two hundred years ago (in 2262) after almost a century of on-and-off conflict between the *humans*, *tavak*, *kch-thk* and *balla*, in response to the *mynatid* threat. Went through a period of growth and social change known as *the Flowering*. An ephemeral ally of the Combine was the *Vas Kra*, a gestalt of non-corporeal entities of great power and subtle influence.

The Bleed: Expansion into the Bleed brought the Combine into conflict with the *durugh*, who had already begun to lay claim to that region of space. After much conflict the *durugh* ceded control of the Bleed to the Combine but engaged in a cold war with them, interrupted with periods of low-intensity warfare. This continued into the Utopian Era as prosperity and scientific advancement bring about a golden age in the Combine.

The War: Seventeen years ago the *Mohilar*, a mysterious alien force, struck suddenly and without warning across Combine space. Massive, deadly vessels appeared and unleashed terrible weapons on many worlds. Their allies included *the durugh*. Much of the War remains clouded now, as the strange amnesia-like effects of *the Conundrum* touches everyone. All that is known is that seven years ago the *durugh* turned on their allies, apparently fearing a betrayal, and following that the *Mohilar* effectively *vanished* from the galaxy. At the same time, the *Vas Kra* were somehow ejected from their cosmic state and reduced to shadows of their former selves, rendered corporeal and mortal: the *val mal*.

Translight: *Translight corridors* are fissures of spatial instability that thread their twisting way through the known galaxy. Physicists continue to debate their origin. The corridors are not fixed in space; they orbit through the universe, just as the rest of the galaxy does, but at a fractionally variant rate. No two trips between points connected by a corridor take exactly the same amount of time. Before embarking on any given journey, navigators must continually track and update the positioning of corridors. Ships use *translight engines* surround to themselves with a bubble of unidirectional quantum energy to take advantage of the corridors.

Navigation: All translight corridors are unstable and subject to turbulence and interference. Though this was true before the war, conditions are much worse now; *Mohilar* weapons damaged the corridors. Although the damaged areas have drifted in the seven years since the *Mohilar* vanished, in general the hardest hit sectors are those where the bulk of the fighting took place. Corridors in the Bleed suffer worse disruptions than some of the other outer sectors, but are less snarled than those around the core worlds. Sometimes a ship must leave a corridor to avoid a breach or rough spot and travel on standard engine power to the next navigable stretch of corridor; this is known as *dropjumping*. At other times a temporary flux state called a *serpentine* may spontaneously arise to connect two otherwise disparate corridors, radically shortening a ship's journey.

Travel Times: Translight corridors *cluster* near some systems, and are sparser in others. Areas with few corridors are called *outzones*. Clusters and outzones maintain their relative positions even though orbital drift changes the location of worlds within the overall pattern. Travel in or between adjoining clusters is always quicker than travel within, or to or from, an outzone.

Meson Shrapnel: Weapons used by the Mohilar (or was it the Combine?) destabilised the quantum bonds between matter particles, leaving behind trails of a dangerous half-substance dubbed *meson shrapnel*. Something of a catch-all term, meson shrapnel can disrupt translight corridors, cause interference to communications or sensors, and cause other strange anomalous conditions. It can even help sometimes, amplifying communications or sensor sweeps, or create serpentes.

Standard Equipment: All Lasers are equipped with a *headset*, communicators with small cameras and holographic visor screens that enable a team to exchange audio and visual transmissions in real time, and link up to their ship to access information or perform an image analysis. They often include a *unireader* plug-in that decodes the written script of any known language the user is looking at. All seasoned travellers have a *Rosetta Chip* that is implanted in the ear to translate known alien languages into their native tongue, albeit with distinctive accents. A Laser's main tool is the *tether*, a virtual hand-held device that is part interactive holographic display and part personal sensor suite; it is often incorporated into a headset, or worn as a belt buckle, arm band or bracelet. They also employ *snails*, audio and visual recorders used for surveillance purposes. For defence, Lasers are each issued with a *disruptor*, a personal energy weapon that can stun (non-lethal disruption; NLD or "nulled") or kill. They protect themselves with *poppers*, one-shot devices that neutralise NLD fire.

Laser Authority: When Lasers are hired to enforce laws, or encounter lawbreakers in the course of solving apparently non-criminal problems, they must operate under the *client's laws* of evidence and official conduct. Although contracts are processed through the Combine government at the space station *Ossa One*, Lasers may find themselves working for non-Combine governments. They may also be hired by private individuals or business concerns. When working for non-governmental clients, Lasers operate within the confines of the legal system that constrain their *clients*. On matters of jurisdiction Lasers wield the authority of the Combine and can treat all Combine-affiliated worlds as one big jurisdiction, while autonomous worlds rarely enter into extradition treaties or cooperate with Combine representatives. The Combine claims the right to prosecute all crimes committed within their boundaries, which includes on ships in open space, while autonomous or alien worlds make the counter-claim that crimes perpetrated on their vessels or stations be treated as if occurring on their sovereign territory. Given a choice between competing jurisdictional claims, Lasers must follow their clients' wishes, as expressed in the assignment contract. In rare cases contracts may extend to Lasers the discretion to choose the jurisdiction that will best serve the client's interests, or those of justice in the abstract.