

# Ashen Stars: The Seven Peoples

## The Balla

Balla are silky-haired, bright-eyed beings with perfectly symmetrical facial features and ideally proportioned musculature. As a point of honour, balla are trained not to use their appearance to achieve dominance over others. Although this principle is not universally followed, the average balla is a surprisingly awkward seducer.

All balla are rocked by powerful emotions which they continually work to contain and conceal. Without constant mental discipline, they might faint, weep uncontrollably, or surrender to violent rage. By far the most common symptom of emotional surrender is derangement of the senses. A device known as the *mor sohn* allows them to literally bottle up their excess emotions. If they fail to use it or lose access to it, they risk slipping forever into a hallucinatory fog.

They do not mention their emotions at all — including the need to suppress them. Outside of the process in which children are trained to exercise mental discipline, no balla in good standing would ever discuss the control or consequences of their emotions. Where discussion of emotions is unavoidable, they learn to speak obliquely, in the hypothetical third person. Instead of saying “This angers me” one might say “In a similar situation, one might experience the state known as anger.”

Translation devices render their speech as formal and portentous.

## The Cybes

Cybes are genetically and cybernetically altered beings, originally from human stock. They are all the result of super-soldier experimentation undertaken during the Mohilar War.

Most of their kind consider themselves a new species, *homo amplius*. About 70% of cybes fall into this category. Cybes of this persuasion seek to build their own settlements and cultures. They envision a utopian cybe society based on the principles of self-determination, mutability of body and soul, and personal freedom. Members of this dominant faction call themselves amp or evolver.

About one in ten cybes consider themselves to still be human. They resent the notion that they might be anything else, reject political separatism, and seek full integration with human societies. Other cybes contemptuously refer to them as vestigials; they call themselves integrationists and label the so-called amps as transers.

Cybes can reprogram some of their abilities at will, at the cost of personality drift based on the neural template being used.

Translation devices render their speech patterns as slightly stilted and robotic. Some speak in a staccato rhythm or a monotone, or avoid the use of contractions.

## The Durugh (dure-uh)

Short, with twisted features and hunched physiques, the durugh have dense musculature and bone structure making them heavier than their human counterparts. Their fingers are disproportionately long and thin, with thick and partially bifurcated thumbs. Durugh tend toward pale complexions and dark hair.

A once-despised enemy of The Combine, the durugh initially threw in their lot with the Mohilar. Their much-derided penchant for double-dealing proved indispensable when their martyred former king used his access to the Mohilar mothership to discover their genocidal plans for the durugh after the Combine was defeated. Thanks to The Conundrum, what they consider their due credit for the defeat of the Mohilar has been taken away from them. Although a small faction of durugh want to go back to the old ways and fight the Combine, a new majority seeks peaceful union with it. But the durugh were the primary foes of the Combine peoples for generations, and old perceptions die hard.

Its old hierarchical structure, based on a rigid class system and enforced by brutal punishment, has fallen by the wayside. Now all the classes can perform the dimension phase, making a police state impossible to maintain. Each durugh world has fallen into its own unique anarchy, some more benign than others. The future is wide open, assuming they don't all back-stab each other to death first.

Translation devices often render durugh speech as sibilant, high-pitched or whiny. This undermines even their most lofty expressions. Despite years of effort the technical breakthroughs needed to remedy this flaw remain strangely elusive.

## The Humans

Humans belong to the Combine's most numerous and politically dominant species. They generally look just like a particularly fit and attractive human being of the early 21st century. About one in twenty humans now boast genetically inherited body modifications; today it is not uncommon to encounter people with brightly-hued skin, pronounced facial ridges, luminous hair, or cat-like eyes. Some conformist cultures require all citizens to display a distinctive set of cosmetic alterations; others insist on original human form, or OHF as it is called. As with any species, use of viroware may also alter their appearance.

Those with a high opinion of humans and their history believe them to be inspiring, innovative, and resourceful. Those with a more jaundiced view see a history of chauvinism, unchecked expansion, and heedless resource consumption.

Although all species tend to divide people into “us” and “them”, this tendency is hard-wired particularly deeply into the human psyche. Humans are known for treating positive traits universal to all species as somehow unique to their own with phrases like “indomitable human spirit.” They also tend to refer to negative traits as inhuman or supernatural, even though there is no form of cruelty so repellent that it does not feature extensively in the chronicles of human history.

Still, without their boundless sense of the possible, the Combine would not have come into being. Without their ruthless

streak, it would not have prevailed against the Mohilar. As the age of rebuilding begins, it's up to them to ensure that humanity's best qualities take precedence over its worst.

### **The Kch-Thk** (kick-thick)

Every kch-thk looks like a six-foot-tall humanoid locust, walking on two legs and using the other four limbs to wield weapons. The egg each individual originally hatched from was chosen after an exhaustive process of inspection by their clan, a colony of several thousand individuals. Hundreds of other slightly less perfect larva are imprinted with their DNA during this process. Upon hatching, every kch-thk is invested with a name and trained in the six warrior arts. After this time some choose to specialise in some other task while others continue to devote themselves to warlike pursuits. They crack-cricked with joy at the arrival of the Mohilar War, regarding it as a crowning opportunity in which they could fulfil their collective destiny as killers and devourers. Kch-thk perpetually seek chances to prove themselves, and are always on the lookout for new food sources.

For the kch-thk their chitinous body is all but disposable. When it is destroyed or damaged beyond repair, they can migrate their consciousness into a new larva kept in a nearby temperature-controlled chamber. In a matter of days, if not hours, the larva is grown to full size. The new body is in every respect a copy of the original.

Culturally, kch-thk are materialistic, unsentimental, and warlike. The typical kch-thk speaks with sometimes off-putting frankness. Niceties designed to prevent hurt feelings are lost on them. Many have not lost the habit of describing people or their treasured animal companions by their likely flavours. As in, "The man at the shipyard was fatty and grain-infused."

Even after they reached the stars, kch-thk were enthusiastic devourers of other species, making no exceptions for tasty-looking sentients. As their contribution to the founding of the Combine, their ancestors agreed to a species-wide genetic alteration; an ineradicable behavioural compulsion now prevents them from eating humanoids.

The popping and clicking noises made by kch-thk mandibles when they talk bleeds through into audio translations of their speech.

### **The Tavak**

At an average seven feet in height and topping the scales at close to half a ton, the tavak are the most physically robust of the seven peoples. Descended from the armadillo-like creatures of their homeworld, Tav, they are covered with hairy plates of natural armour. Piercing retractable claws wait within long, wrinkled fingers.

Their culture transformed when their ancestors discovered the warp corridors and reached the stars. Over the course of a generation, they transformed themselves from peaceful, placid insectivores, surviving through an instinct for social harmony, into formidable warriors. Yet even as they embraced the art of combat, they held fiercely onto their traditions of spiritual serenity and political coexistence. Humans take credit for brokering the formation of the Combine, but it is the Tavak philosophy that provides it with its guiding principles.

By default they are calm, centred and even somewhat sleepy. Only when danger threatens do they rouse themselves with the warrior's mantra and transform into a furious fighting machine. They end the fight with decisive, but not excessive force, then return to their state of lowered excitation. Or that is what happens under ideal circumstances. In fact, the quick transition from peace to war has left them susceptible to battle frenzy. When in this state, their fury is a terrible thing to witness, a danger to foe and friend alike.

Translators render their speech as lilting and sometimes painfully slow. Fortunately for the typical Tavak, they are beings of few words. When they have something important to say, they say it. Most of the time they lapse into a meditative state of alert tranquillity. Most have had to alter their conversational style to be understood by outsiders. Discussions among Tavak consist mostly of grunts and nearly imperceptible gestures, which are somehow able to resolve complex issues into a happy consensus in a few quicksilver instants.

### **The Vas Mal**

Once — less than a blink of an eye in cosmic reckoning — they were infinite. They were the Vas Kra, beings of pure energy and universal consciousness. Though they were not gods, and sought not the worship of biological beings, they sometimes received it all the same. Their thoughts reverberated through the universe, they became one with the great cycles of being and unbeing. There was neither happiness nor unhappiness. Neither desire nor contentment. There simply was the Vas Kra, and that was balanced and infinite.

From time to time their sense of pervading essence led them to intervene in mortal affairs. They acted at the margins, working small changes of perception, fostered coincidences, caused unseen connections. And through this action the warring species achieved unity, and formed the mortal polity called the Combine. Thus were sown the seeds of their doom. For universal awareness must not become specific, lest it devolve. And by attaching themselves to the practical fortunes of the flesh-bound, they opened a conduit between destinies.

Somehow, it is believed, the Mohilar found a way to attack them. They were devolved, returned to mortal form, as they had not been for untold eons. Yet their new bodies were not the perfect specimens of distant memory. They were weak, malformed, hideous. The head is oversized, the eyes black and enlarged, the body spindly and twisted. Their skin is grey or green and semi-translucent. When using their psychic powers — mere mocking echoes of what they once possessed — their luminous brain can be seen pulsing within the skull. Although they still retain vestigial remnants of their universe-spanning mental abilities, they overtax their puny new bodies. They became the vas mal.

There are only a few thousand of them now. Despite their small numbers, their influence on post-war history has led the mortals to regard them as the seventh of the great peoples of the sector. All seek to reverse the devolution process and return to immortal oneness. They believe that somewhere in the Bleed lies the cure to this appalling condition of weakness and mortality. Now equal members of the Combine, they join with their erstwhile mortal protégés to conduct this search.