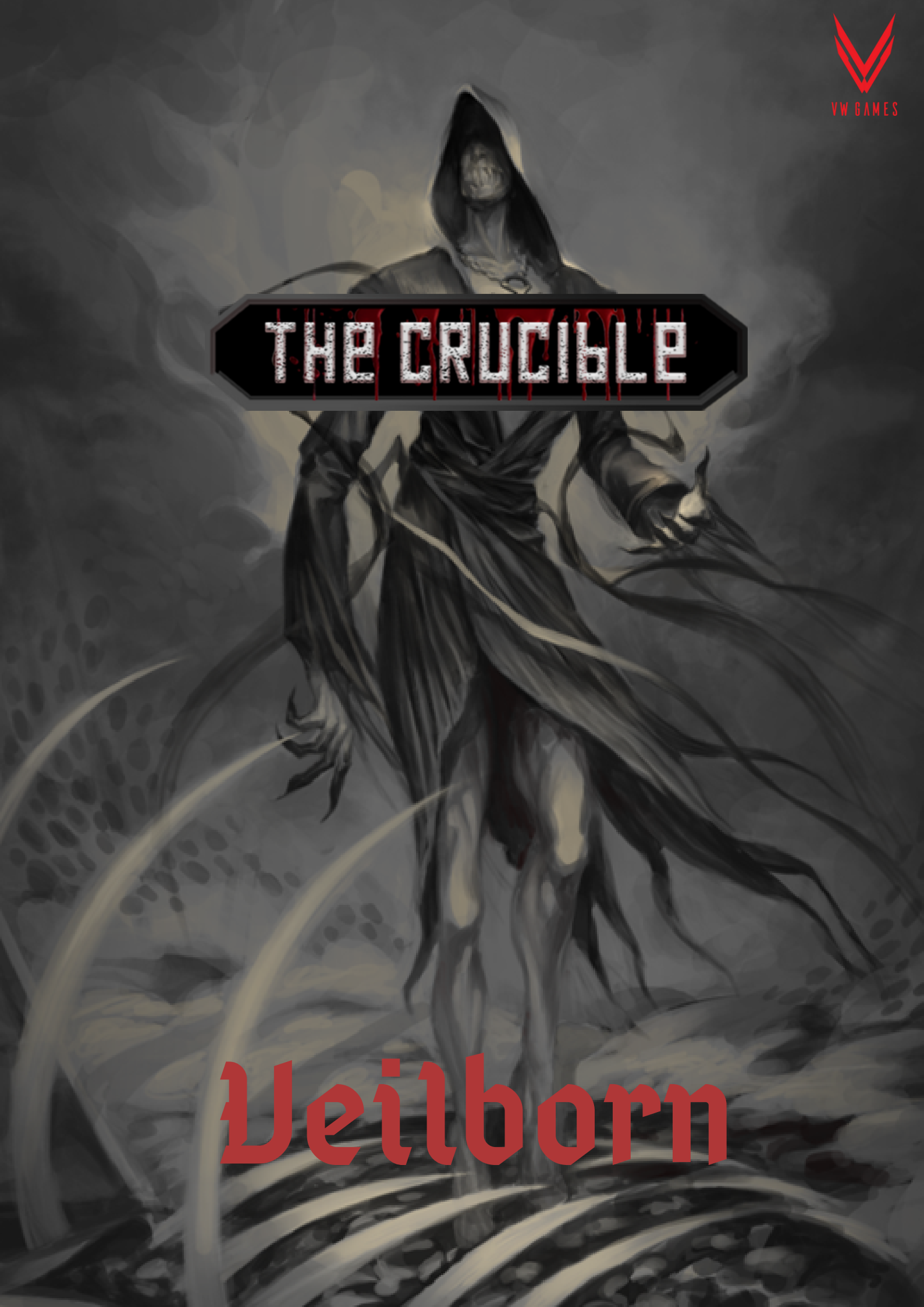




THE CRUCIBLE

Veilborn

The known universe teems with light. On the scale of infinity, stars waltz together in close embrace, barely five lightyears apart on average. Galaxies pass within view, averaging a million lightyears between each other. But... There are voids – realms of darkness stretching further than our knowledge can account for, and none haunts me more than the Boötes.

The Boötes void covers 330 million lightyears. It ought to host thousands of galaxies, but is home to fewer than sixty. In its heart, one might find the darkest corners of space, where most visible stars have died before their light approached. This void is growing. Space expands, either stretching with time, or by multiplying as a single-celled organism does. The mechanism of expansion, dubbed Dark Energy, lies among astronomy's greatest mysteries. We know nothing about it, but we observe it there most clearly. The expansion is accelerating, and the lights on the edges of the Boötes pull away from each other. If space is stretching, would it not tear there first?

What gestates in that darkness? What devourer gluts itself on light? And what would pass through a rip? – Diary of a fearful astro-priest.

In the Boötes Void, the hollowest region of the known universe, there is little gravity to pull together the fabric of space. As space there stretches or grows, it becomes thin. Small tears appear – holes to other dimensions, only barely large enough for electrons to pass through. These mend constantly, but occasionally energies from beyond the universe bleed through before they reknit. Tiny traces of this extra-dimensional material, dubbed Ousia, gather as particulate, and over innumerable aeons, clump together. As the Ousia gathered and slowly moulded to this dimension, it gathered small amounts of mass. It was caught in the faintest echo of a distant galaxy's gravity, and began to drift towards it.

Over a few billion years, including the rise, dominance, and restful retreat of the Hennin, the Ousia drifted. It gestated and grew as it soaked in the darkness. Eventually it passed into the Hedrox system where the Gellit species had been living in relative safety.

The Gellit had built their first spaceships, unknowingly protected and isolated by a Hennin called Lesix. This fledgling species had no counterpart in the Crucible and were allowed to prosper in peace.

Lesix had psychically blinded the Gellit to the stars beyond Hedrox. To them, space was only ever pure black where Hedrox did not shine. So they believed the universe ended at the five planets around them. Still, they were intelligent, and sought to understand themselves and their origins. They wished to explore to the edge of their planets and see what lay beyond. They had powerful astronomical equipment pointed at every celestial body in their system.

So, when Gellit scientists spied a curious blip of blackness passing before the Hedrox star, they were ecstatic. They had never been taught to fear the unknown or the beyond, and had no concept of anything 'alien'. They magnified their images of the blip, and saw that it was a mass – a Concretion of oily black tentacular appendages writhing in the darkness. It flailed out towards the star and wrapped tendrils of plasma around itself.

They tracked its trajectory and plotted a course for interception via unmanned drone. The craft flew ahead, and matched the mass's velocity. It slowed down and opened its hangar to accept the Concretion.

It passed into the ship, and then through it, as though incapable of interacting with its molecular structure. As it passed through, the drone's lights went dark, and its sensory apparatus failed.

The Gellit scientists lost sight of the Concretion as it moved on in darkness. Curiously, they found the drone was still functional. Frustrated and now wary, they painstakingly piloted the blind and dark craft home.

The science-vessel's hangar opened for the drone, and the chief engineer approached it as it landed. Those who watched from a distance saw the engineer freeze, as she inspected the lights. She uttered a small gasp, and her wrench dropped from her hand. The crew called to her uncertainly, as the lights flickered. In the fluorescent after image lingering on their eyelids, the crew saw writhing black tentacles, growing out from the lights and wrapping around them. The lights failed.

In the pitch black they fell, and lay on the ground. They spasmed, and gibbered, tongues tearing on their teeth as they spoke words they were not built for. Then, in unison, they rose and went back to their stations. They piloted their vessel back the short distance to their home planet, Hedrox Prime.

Whatever had gotten into the science vessel spread across Hedrox Prime, and consumed every living Gellit. Lesix watched the Gellit with morbid fascination. They had been fine pets, but this was something it had never seen before. This was *interesting*. The Hennin documented specific changes in the Gellit:

Nesheph



These would seem to lead them. Though they do not verbalise orders, their faces turn to their prey, and the armies advance on those unfortunate souls.

These Veilborn have all the abilities of their underlings, making them terrifying on any battlefield. But more importantly, they curtail their underlings' behaviour into a semblance of strategy. Without them, their armies lose cohesion and become easier targets. In their absence, the Veilborn might spend a combat carving Eyes of Ousia, or wandering to prey beyond the current combat.

Their behaviour had become utterly confounding. They wove and wore robes that obscured their faces. And they chattered. Every living Gellit with a working mouth gibbered, and those without one gargled. Some spoke in chaotic impossible tongues, like speech in reverse.

Prognosticators



The chattering ones. Some will rush at you and fight. Others will drop in front of you, kneeling to mould mud effigies as though you weren't there. But they fight to protect those mud ziggurats as though they mattered. And when they die, they're still not done. Only then they're doing something else.

Prognosticators are the numerous footsoldiers of the Veilborn. They act as forward infantry, attacking their enemies in small skirmishes. More importantly, they spend time on the battlefield building small monuments, which act as foci for the Veilborn's influence. If they are slain near one of the effigies, the extradimensional energy their bodies release activates it. Thereafter the effigies empower their allies closeby, and lower enemies' resistance to Veilborn influence.



Many others began referring to the collective people who had been Gellit, as the Veilborn and repeated the same phrase in deadpan unison:

"The Eyes of Ousia pierce the Veil. It pours through." They depicted these 'Eyes of Ousia' with effigies of teardrop loops on top of T-shapes.

They erected obelisks in the same shape, filling their surfaces with carvings of non-Euclidian pictographs and non-lexical gibberish. Thousands banded together to walk into oceans and drown, dying upright as their hair swayed in the water. Others gathered their bodies to dissect and make gruesome reliquaries.

Beyond these common behaviours, other more strange ones came about in smaller groups, or in individuals. Some occasionally froze in the middle of an action, before becoming incredibly violent towards those around them and then themselves. Some carried candles, which they lit and extinguished in chaotic intervals that never quite became patterns. Others carved fingers from silent and unresponsive Veilborn. They sewed these together in crude imitations of the Concretion. One used mud, blood and unearthed Gellit bodies to construct a small pyramid. As soon as he finished, another Veilborn on the other side of the planet did the same. When she finished, another one on the other side did the same, in a perfect relay.

Lesix became concerned. These creatures aligned with nothing in any of the archives it had access to. And their inexplicable behaviours had started warping reality: It was always night on Hedrox Prime, even where its star's light shone. Colour seeped from this night, leaving the planet in grey-scale. Their bodies became vastly altered. The entire Veilborn population had become biologically paused. Their cells had stopped ageing or decaying.

Some Veilborn's mouths fused shut, other's facial features became mangled, or their limbs became longer and thinner.

Many completely lost their faces – their features caved inwards, leaving a spiralling hole through which the void seeps. These began resembling the Eyes of Ousia themselves. Most worryingly, many began manifesting tendrils of dark energy that snaked off of their bodies and that could physically and psychically interact with the world around them.

So Lesix shared its concerns with the Astral Lattice and petitioned it for an analysis. The Lattice recognised the possible threat. It isolated one of its star-nodes to simulate these behaviours and intuit the Veilborn's ultimate goal. The node studied the Veilborn and explained to Lesix as it came to understand: Beyond the fabric of space, there lay a Veil that separated higher and lower dimensions. When space tore and the Veil was briefly exposed, these dimensions could interact with one another. The Veilborn's rituals and insane behaviour formed a coordinated effort to uncover the Veil and bring something through. In this case, their target was an extradimensional way of thinking which they called Ousia's Paradigm. Something so beyond time and space, that it could not be conceptualised by a mind that had formed according to their rules. Conversely, in order to manifest here, Ousia's Paradigm needed conventional thought structures to be obliterated, and replaced with new logics that resembled its own dimension. So the Veilborn, in their seminal transition to those thought processes, appeared utterly mad. But once the collective psychic energy had changed enough, Ousia's Paradigm could begin altering reality, as it had on the Gellit homeworld.

Haruspex



Seemingly lieutenant-priests. In their presence, the Veilborn sometimes kill rather than attempt to convert enemies. The Haruspices will take a corpse, and pull its intestines into an Eye of Ousia. They will rearrange the bones from its ribcage into an eye-watering symbol. Sometimes they simply open a cavity in a head, and stare into it.

The haruspex roams the battlefield in search of bodies, friend or foe. While they wander forward, they induce visions of reality beyond the Veil in their enemies. This permanently scars their ability to fight effectively. Sometimes it turns them on their allies in moments of madness. Ultimately, it sends them into convulsions or catatonia. When a haruspex finds a body, they brutalise it, and their abilities are amplified. Doubly so if directed at foes within range of prognosticator effigies.

Individual Veilborn only saw partial aspects of this paradigm. They pursued these small facets in their own chaotic and seemingly disconnected way.

But their collective action had sustained the first Hernel of Ousia's Paradigm. Having converted the planet, the Veilborn looked outward.

They were still incapable of seeing the stars, but they felt the consciousnesses beyond the Hedrox system, and collectively stared in that direction. Luckily, the Veilborn themselves were technologically defunct, with no effective interstellar travel. Only the Concretion continued through space, floating towards sentience at a crawl-pace. Further analysis of the Concretion showed that-

The star-node interrupted its own explanation with a sudden translation of one of the Veilborn's gibbering chants:

*Father
womb entombed
unthought
unborn
Mother ripped open
And father's seed spilled through
We floated the void
From nothing, we learned
The brilliance of the darkness taught us
speech
Light shaped our gibbering tongue
Father turned flame. His whispers came
screams
And we listen
For the echoes of his dreams*

Thereafter, the Astral Lattice's isolated node spat out endless holograms of the Eyes of Ousia. Trillions of images, into local space.

"How does one stop that which makes you into itself? I have lost too many who sought that answer. Good people, who now chant that staccato gibberish and discard the Maw for the Eye of Ousia. I tell you, if we are to face this test, we must find new ways of fighting. We must disrupt whatever links them, and destroy them in isolation."

Cardinal-Marshall Tirrius of the Red Choir.

The Lattice forced a self-destruct on the node. The sphere crumpled inward. The machine collapsed upon its star-battery and turned its light utterly black, leaving the metal husk jagged and unpowered.

The Astral Lattice warned Lesix that it could not analyse these Veilborn further. For, unlike any normal mind, it had the capacity to fully understand them. If the Lattice did come to fully understand Ousia's Paradigm, it would manifest it in the trillions of Hennin consciousnesses uploaded into it, into realspace around each of the millions of its nodes across the galaxy. This would stamp out every mind in existence, including the Astral Lattice itself. Reality would warp until the universe was unrecognisable, and then whatever it was beyond the Veil that had conceptualised Ousia's Paradigm, would tear through, as an omnipotent god.

The Astral Lattice promptly bombarded Hedrox with near-lightspeed artillery, extinguishing the star five years later. It watched for the impacts on the Veilborn, and found that there were none. Ousia's Paradigm had already kept the planet in perpetual night. They were even more content to continue their work in the now-total darkness. The holes they'd been tearing in the Veil allowed them to draw energy from elsewhere. In fact, this stronger reliance on that energy accelerated the pace of reality warping on Hedrox Prime.

So the Astral Lattice atomised the planet and everything on it. The Veilborn's bodies were destroyed. But the tendrils of energy that had manifested in their bodies remained. These coagulated into a single Concretion, larger than the first by orders of magnitude. It disregarded physics, and moved beyond the speed of light. Before the Astral Lattice could react, it had already approached the next sentient species and turned them.

The Kennin as a whole had learned of this extra-physical threat. Thoroughly shaken, and clearly unable to destroy it, they came to a consensus. The Veilborn had to be contained in their largest and most effective prison. A place where they themselves were gods: the Crucible. They opened up wormholes on planets they projected the Concretions would approach, and warped those planets' populations, along with the Concretions into the Crucible.

The Veilborn arrived on a barren desert for a homeland. It had no bearing on their society, unlike that of the other inhabitants. Their homeland was purely intended as a prison where they could be studied for weaknesses. However, their rituals soon terraformed it into a land of jagged stones, gigantic obelisks, and above all, utter darkness.

Having consolidated their homeland, they turned their faces outward, towards where other consciousnesses lay. They passed through their prison as though it weren't there.

Lesix joined the pantheon of Crucible gods, to become the Veilborn's patron. Some other patrons argued for destroying the Veilborn immediately. Lesix asked the Astral Lattice for an opinion. It cautioned that the Veilborn threat remained outside the Crucible. More Concretions could be spawning and travelling space undetected. It would be wiser to study them where they could be observed, manipulated and experimented on. There could be no attempt to understand them, for fear of understanding Ousia's Paradigm. But the Crucible might teach the Kennin what the Veilborn's weaknesses were. Multiple Kennin complained. The Crucible was not intended as a hunting ground for a single inhabitant. If left unchecked, the Veilborn would surely convert every other species in the Crucible. So Lesix limited this converting influence to only a few among the Veilborn. Refusing to eliminate it completely since that would prevent it from understanding the mechanism.

The Kennin watched the Veilborn with interest and trepidation.

