

# THE CRUCIBLE

*"There is something out there, beyond our ability or even our comprehension. It visits our world without our knowledge. It abducts us without us ever knowing how. And then it shows us the friends we've lost. Confused, scared, and fighting for survival against the contemptible filth they share that prison with." Admiral Liu*

The Xennin are the undisputed masters of the galaxy. Having exterminated every threat, every near-equal, every upstart, and every space-capable society, they rested. They uploaded their consciousnesses into the Astral Lattice – an infinite set of individual heavens powered by Astral Nodes. These godlike computers encased stars and used them as batteries.

Solar systems went dark as their stars winked out under the celestial constructs. For a few million years, the Xennin withdrew into themselves.

The Astral Lattice was equipped with apocalyptic defences. Its constructs were distributed across the stars, so any point in the galaxy was within a few decades' reach of interstellar artillery. Any species that discovered the Lattice, or that simply developed too far, would have its home stars extinguished by lumps of hyper-dense material travelling near light speed.

The rest of the galaxy recovered, and new species fought their ways to primacy on their own planets. Unable to see any light from the stars consumed by the Astral Lattice, astronomers had to explain away an invisible source of distorted gravity on a galactic scale. They called it Dark Matter, and compensated for its impacts in their understanding of physics.

Occasionally, some Xennin left the Astral Lattice. They are highly individualistic in nature, and they harbour little love for one another. Each one leaving the Lattice had their own ambitions, questions and senses of morality. They designed their own bodies for real-space. Their only common physical characteristics were faces that were featureless except for three eyes down one side, and a single eye on the other. In these bodies, they could travel space, change shape and size without limit, and teleport across the galaxy. They travelled. Some took an interest in the fledgling species, in their societies and lethality.

Individual Xennin were omnipotent compared to whichever species they approached, and for the most part, they chose to remain unseen.

Some Xennin turned their victims' worlds torturous. They committed casual genocides before moving to the next point of interest. Others sought to sculpt the lesser species towards prosperity. These protected their pets, but would also contain them in isolation, lest they develop too far and draw the attention of the Astral Lattice's artillery.

A few Xennin banded together to conduct experiments with scientific dispassion. This group wanted to see what their subjects were capable of when pitted against one another. But they were wary of the Astral Lattice. The machine had developed the criteria for a fledgling species' destruction independently of the Xennin. None of them knew the exact parameters that doomed their project species. So, they needed a way to introduce them to each other without giving them the technology and coordinates to meet.

To this end, they created the Crucible. A project so colossal that they could attempt it only once – at the galactic core. They built and injected a life-sustaining bubble into the galaxy's central black hole.

This Crucible exerted an equivalent outward force to the black hole's crushing pressure, creating an impenetrable and inescapable realm that appeared to be a large planet to any on the inside. In the Crucible, the Xennin were gods. They could alter the flow of time, warp space, and change the laws of physics. They filled the Crucible with particles – quantum entangled with twins on the outside. These particles coated the creatures on the interior, duplicating their movement. Their entangled twins on the outside mimicked these actions, allowing the Xennin to see the inhabitants. Remaining hidden, they stole away portions of the populations of advanced or interesting species, and seeded them into the Crucible.

*"More than one of the oneiro-augurs have dreamt the Crucible to be inside of a collapsed star. But what entity could possibly direct such forces? What could exist out there that saw a black hole as a tool, rather than an insurmountable obstacle? And how do we appease it?" Caradochian Archfin*





A Xennin who seeded a species became their patron god. Sometimes they revealed themselves in the guise of these species' existing beliefs. Other times they spoke through dreams, or signs. They gifted each species a homeland that catered to their society.

Some homelands were the size of cities, others were the size of continents, or oceans. These homelands were 'perfect' for each species, but also acted as mazes to trap them while they climatized to their new reality. Here, each species found resources to build and develop. The Xennin meticulously curated the homelands. Each species had what they needed to build the societies and technology that had made them interesting to begin with. But, by mutual agreement, the Xennin constrained the more advanced species' resources to ensure they did not dominate the Crucible. Each of these 'gods' watched their peers' pets, vigilant for any perceived cheating. The creatures inside were unaware of the Xennin, or their games, but their world was defined by these invisible gods' whims and politics.

The homelands were loosely connected by landscapes that constantly warped until observed. Most conflicts resolved in these no-man's-lands, as the Xennin guided travellers towards each other, or shrunk space to force equally matched populations of travellers together.

Those who left their homelands often found the way home gone, half their friends disappeared, and themselves abruptly in a closed arena with a hostile species. Some species explicitly left their homelands to wage war, forging supply lanes to enemy homelands and locking the routes in place through constant observation.

To the species inside, the Crucible was a fever dream where the only solid environment is a home under regular assault from bizarre and horrific enemies. To most, this was hell. To a few it was heaven. To all, it was a zero-sum game where they could either exterminate, or be exterminated. It is unclear how many species are in the Crucible, or whether more are being added.

To date, eighteen species have found their ways out of their homelands. Some are unified under collective existential threat. Others are under the direct control of a single gestalt consciousness. Some have had their normally fluid hierarchies frozen by the danger. Others have devolved into internal warfare, where political schisms forced them apart.

Most of the Xennin agreed that the development of species outside the Crucible must be hemmed in, especially in terms of interstellar diplomacy. Some were rankled by the idea of a galaxy infested with harmonious lessers. Others simply preferred that their pets did not draw the attention of the Astral Lattice. In both cases, they fomented a xenophobia among these creatures: They used the quantum entangled particles to transmit the Crucible conflicts as holographic images to the home planets of each species. Some Xennin housed these transmissions in public structures, others did it inside the eyelids of their targets.

The lesser species were unaware of the broadcasts' origins, but they became facts of life. Many relished in the blood sport, and learned to hate the aliens. The Xennin who adopted the species on the outside often petitioned those who controlled the Crucible conflicts for specific results. If they could make a case curious or interesting enough, or if they could play off of the Crucible gods' rivalries, these would step in and shape specific battles, within reason.

Some species have watched their counterparts in the Crucible utterly exterminated, while others are shown constant betrayals from species that might have become their allies on the outside. Even the most magnanimous Xennin spreads this distrust, believing harmony between the lesser species would doom them to indiscriminate extinction.

Many species who see the broadcasts consider them a call to action – a reason to find and destroy those they have seen in the Crucible, especially if they believe themselves technologically superior. They have studied these aliens' strengths and weaknesses. They develop their astronomical surveillance rapidly and seek out these enemies. Some, free of Xennin interference, or with their invisible guiding hands, have begun their journeys beyond their home system. For now, the Lattice has not thought it necessary to exterminate them. The Xennin watch with interest, waiting to study the line which, when crossed, means extinction for a species. Would it be a milestone in energy production? A specific speed of interstellar travel? Diplomatic ties, or societal or technological leaps? Time would tell.

Inside the Crucible, a single victor inevitably dominates the others through subjugation or destruction. Once it does, the Xennin bring back a chosen set of combatants and reset the interior conditions. They determine whether to allow the inhabitants to retain the knowledge of their victories or defeats.

Some rational species have fallen to despair, remembering a series of horrific defeats.

They become passive, or commit mass suicide. Other times, those clear thinkers might rally the other like-minded ones to build a harmonious Crucible that extinguishes only the irrevocably hostile species. But on those occasions, their homelands become bastions of agony. Enemies gain direct access to their undefended underbellies. Food rots. The molecular concentration of air changes to become less breathable, and temperatures become extreme.

Any alliance that is not agreed on by the patrons is punished, and ennui is similarly unforgivable.

So the few Xennin who still take an interest in the affairs beyond themselves have turned the galaxy irrevocably hostile. The Crucible has become a defining structure in galactic orthodoxy without its inhabitants ever knowing the truth. They fight eternally, and their conquests and defeats determine their peoples' politics on the outside.

*"Where are they?! These aliens? We see them in the games! We know how they fight! We crave that contest. We will not be denied! Study the skies, find the signs. Let us go and take their spines for ourselves!" Sanguine Assembly news pundit.*

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