

A Lens to The Universe

If the math was right, the universe was about to witness an epic and ethereal death.

Crystal sat cross legged in the center of the bamboo floor of her personal yoga studio, bathed in the warm glow of her salt lamps. She inhaled, feeling the warm air flow through her nose into her chest, savoring the scent of lemon and eucalyptus.

Pause.

Exhale. She let out the air with an auditory *haaaaaa* and tried to release her frustrations, agitations and anxieties. *You are a survivor, she* reminded herself.

Inhale.

Hold.

Release.

Inhale. Hold. Release.

Several breaths and a cup of chamomile tea later, Crystal felt ready for tonight's event. She pulled the headset off the shelf. It was a new prototype, a gold band that was worn like a crown. It featured a wire hair net of electrodes that would sync with the user's brain. It was sleek and almost weightless, a far departure from the initial bulky helmets from decades ago.

Crystal rubbed her fingertips on the headset's surface and a digital display illuminated. She keyed in the coordinates for the broadcast frequency. Her hands trembled as she placed the device on her skull.

As instantaneous as a light switch, her consciousness shifted from her primary existence to the trans dimensional plane. At the moment all was dark, except for a large floating countdown with glowing white numbers that indicated just under 5 minutes until tonight's show would begin. She reran the calculations through her mind, hoping her team hadn't made any mistakes. The team in charge of the last show missed by a week, and instead of witnessing a glorious battle, viewers just saw an empty field with rotting carcasses. The employees involved in that program didn't have jobs the following day.

The countdown expired. A title script replaced the countdown "Illumin Media Presents - The Sacrifice of the Ky-Ahl-Din" and as the letters faded, a new scene began to appear.

It was an overhead view of a long cobalt canyon rimmed by a dark green pine forest. As the perspective continued to zoom in, it became apparent the canyon walls were populated by a scattering of beings. They were tall, strong and ape-like, with flowing fur, four arms and short snouts with tusks like a warthog. The cold air turned their breath into icy clouds of water vapor. The scene's point of focus centered on the rocky canyon floor and came to rest on a group of the creatures huddled together.

One was absolutely enormous, more than twice the size of the others. Its tusks were adorned in jewel encrusted caps. A few others stood to its side, wearing toga like robes. In front of this small assembly was a pair of beings. In contrast to the gargantuan leader and the spectators in the canyon, whose fur was naturally colored and in harmony with the natural palate, these two had completely white fur and piercing blue eyes. They were twins. They stood shoulder to shoulder, each pair of arms crossed in front of their torso.

Crystal could feel her breathing quicken, and was vaguely aware of the pulse in her temples. A small smile flickered across her face. They nailed it. All those late nights and hours of pouring over the data had paid off. The large one roared and Crystal's attention returned to the unfolding scene.

The robed ones, priests of some sort, presented a set of objects that resembled barbed wire handcuffs, to the crowd. The spectators grunted and pounded the canyon walls, making a sound that echoed like drums. The priests shackled the arms of the twins. Crimson streaks started to trail down the white fur of their hands. The leader roared again and the twins began to walk, in perfect unison, through the canyon.

For their first few steps, there was absolute silence. Crystal could hear the sounds of pebbles grating against each other on the canyon floor as the pair walked. The quiet was interrupted by a whistling sound as the first stone bulletted through the air and delivered a loud crack as it impacted the forehead of one of the creatures. It stumbled to one knee. The other helped it up, and they pressed their foreheads together in an eight armed embrace. They resumed their solemn steps. The one that was struck had a gash that bled over its brow and down its cheek like a red tear. The other had a rusty stain where their heads had met.

The canyon erupted in a barrage of projectiles. The duo was able to march through most of it. Red stains started spotting their snowy fur. Every now and then one of them would buckle

or stumble, and the crowd would cheer. The other would help its sibling to its feet and the bloody procession would continue.

The march lasted much, much longer than Crystal had anticipated. By now there was no trace of white on the pair and their faces resembled the worst of pummeled boxers, eyes swollen shut, puffy lips, and chipped teeth and tusks.

The final collapse was the only time the two fell together. The assault of rocks ceased and the canyon once again grew quiet. The pair rolled onto their backs, chests heaving with exhaustion, fur saturated with blood and sweat. They held each other's hands, closed their eyes and sang a few notes, in a minor harmony, with one as tenor the other as baritone. The song was short, but it echoed through the canyon.

For a few solemn moments everything was still, including the twins. A pair of snowflakes floated through the canyon, meandering their way through the air currents, weaving around each other in a silent ballet, until softly settling on the two stained brows. Then, like an upturned snowglobe the scene filled with flurries. Soundlessly, the crowd began to climb up the rock walls and dissipate into the pines. The last scene was two snow covered lumps at rest at the bottom of an empty canyon. The transmission ended.

Crystal removed her headset and curled into a ball on her couch, oscillating in a quagmire of emotion. She'd start to laugh hysterically, absolutely thrilled at the success of her efforts and how perfect the broadcast had been, only to be nauseated by an ache in her gut, accompanied by fits of shaking and sobbing with hot tears as she grieved the brutal massacre of these beautiful beings. She hugged a pillow and rocked back and forth as the feelings crashed again and again like ocean waves on a stormy shore.

Crystal felt a buzz on her wrist. Her comm device showed an unintelligible message. It would have to wait until she finished this morning's orientation.

She led the incoming class of trainees down the central corridor of the space station, pointing out the various artifacts and pictures that paid tribute to the history of the broadcast center.

“That's Voyager 1, returned to Earth by the Ceruleans, who found it drifting by their home planet. As you well know, the Ceruleans introduced us to portalling and trans-dimensional communications. We've enjoyed a great partnership over the years, and I'm happy to see we have a few with us in the crowd today.”

A few of the trainees waved their three fingered hands meekly, their opalescent skin flashing nervous shades of orange and purple.

“Next are replicas of the great telescopes that took us back in time. Hubble and James Webb took us to the origins of the universe. And Oculus, the lunar based viewer, took the first images of life on a planet other than Earth.”

A grainy image hung on a wall, showing a planet covered in capillaries of light. Crystal wondered how many of the new recruits knew how that planet's story ended. She used to include the tale of the civilization's self-destruction in the tour, but it really squelched the mood, better to keep things hopeful and bright.

Her wrist com buzzed again, another incoherent message. Maybe there was a glitch.

The group passed through a cleansing room, where the participants were 'washed' in ultraviolet light. They entered the colossal command center. Concentric rings of desks and computer terminals revolved around a spherical holographic display that was several meters wide. The ceiling was glass, allowing a view to a sea of stars.

Crystal allowed them to soak in the wonder of the room they nicknamed the cathedral. After a moment of vicariously relishing their reverence, she addressed the group. “At Illumin, our mission is to connect the universe.”

“Some of you will be Seekers. Your job is like finding a needle in a haystack, except the needle is the size of an atom, and the haystack is the size of a city. We, along with intergalactic partners, are constantly adding more lenses throughout the galaxy to help in the search. Seekers

require an open mind. Our algorithms are best in class and can locate life based on training data, but there are always new manifestations of existence that would be missed without a vigilant eye.”

“For example, Aquus-10, was a water covered moon that would have been passed over as uninhabited, but an observant Seeker noticed the clouds only ever appeared in certain regions. They turned out to be the waste sites of the Hydrae, a civilization that lives completely underwater. Seekers, you will take up the first few rows in the command center.”

On cue, the inner circles of the room illuminated in a soft blue glow. A few of the Seekers waved at the group from their computer terminals.

Crystal’s bracelet had buzzed incessantly during her explanation. She switched it off so she could finish her welcoming speech without disruption.

“Finding life is just the beginning. Because of the nature of our observations, we can only see images from the past. In order to connect the universe, we need to know if these regions of life have survived.”

“In addition to travel and communication, the Ceruleans shared with us the story of their evolution. It was remarkably similar to the narrative of humanity. Again and again as we peer into the past we find common patterns of progression throughout the universe. Life tends to move from simple to complex. Populations oscillate between epochs of progress and dark ages. Ceruleans and Humans are among the hundreds that survived, but the sad truth is many many more fail.”

“This brings us to our biggest department, Actuarial Cosmology. Our Actuarial Cosmologists attempt to predict if a civilization still exists, combining knowledge of astral events with the growing accumulation of data from observed civilizations. If the chances are high enough, we will send an exploratory group to try and make contact. On top of that, in the monitoring phase, the A.C’s are also able to extrapolate when key moments in civilizations are to take place. They can anticipate things like impending social and technical revolutions, wars, and moments of harmony. Our actuarial cosmologists are central to our mission, figuratively and literally.”

Several dozen rows illuminated in green, above the previous lit blue rows. Crystal’s gaze lingered on her old desk for a moment of nostalgia. Now it was occupied by a young earth girl

scrutinizing a data feed. The work was grueling, but the payoff of unlocking a pivotal moment of a species was unparalleled. Crystal shook away the nostalgia and continued the speech.

“However, none of this is cheap. How many of you watched our last broadcast?”

The entire batch of trainees raised their hands, and immediately began a dozen side conversations to unpack the varying emotions of the transmission. Crystal felt chills as she watched the heated discussions, the Ceruleans in the group literally lighting up with excitement. This was one of the most animated reactions she had ever seen. This morning’s numbers backed it up. Her program had shattered funding records. She swelled with pride, but at the same time felt a haunting shadow on her conscience.

“Connecting the universe is not just a matter of making physical contact,” Crystal continued, regaining control of the assembly. “Our media division, which is my area of practice, has the goal of creating connections that are unbound by space and time. We share the stories of the universe. The triumphs. The tragedies. The beautiful moments. The ugly ones.”

“There’s something so beautiful about the fact that the fabric of our feelings - joy, hate, sadness, love - permeates across galaxies and is as essential to existence as hydrogen and carbon. We show the authentic history of civilizations across the galaxy, highlighting the moments that will transcend perception. It doesn’t matter if you are watching a being with scales, wings, or a blob of goo, so long as after the viewing experience, you resonate with that creature. These broadcasts, delivered in immersive high definition ultimately satisfy our most primal universal urge, our longing to connect, to know we are not alone. The viewer fees happen to be a happy consequence.”

The outermost rings of the room lit up in an amber hue, a golden halo circumscribing the command center. A confused recruit asked Crystal to tie it all together.

“Our Seekers help us find new worlds. The A.C’s help us map the likely path of that world’s progression based on our observations. We can’t actually travel back in time, but we can position another telescope somewhere else in the universe and it will be able to see a specific moment in history. We then use the telescope networks, broadcasting at trans-dimensional frequencies to witness these moments in real time, using proprietary artificial intelligence to generate the audio. The real magic is...”

Crystal was cut off from the rest of her explanation because a worker was sprinting down the alley between desks waving his hands and shouting something she couldn't quite make out. Then everything went black.

The command room became a cluster of chaos, like a recently shattered wasp nest. Emergency lights bathed the room in red. Computers started coming back online, only to register alarms about system failures. Feeds from telescopes across the galaxy were being lost. Portal stations were collapsing.

Crystal was paralyzed. What was happening? Her head swam, lost in a sea of thought. A technician tugged on her arm, pulling her from her haze. He handed her a printout. Just before lights out, the comms team received a message. She recognized parts of it as the bizarre messages she had been receiving during the orientation. Altogether, the parts composed latin phrases.

POST TENEBRAS LUX - ORDO AB CHAO - DE OPPRESSO LIBER

“Light after darkness, order from chaos, free them from oppression.”

She shivered. She knew who was behind the attack. Dante, the man she once loved, was now here to destroy her, and based on his message, probably a lot more.

The station was rocked by an explosion. Then another. And another. The concussive blasts knocked people to the floor and made Crystal’s ears ring.

“Drones!” Someone yelled.

Crystal closed her eyes and took a long deep breath, clearing her mind, focusing on grounding herself. Once centered, she began to put the command station back in order.

“Engage emergency defenses,” she directed to the technician who had delivered the message. Calmly, but purposefully, she moved through the rings of desks.

Status update.

Command.

Status update.

Command.

Again and again. The attacks ceased. Connections restored. She was almost to the outer rings when a chorus of chimes and beeps resounded throughout the room.

Everyone had been pinged with the same alert. A broadcast was starting, and the frequency for tuning in was below the notice.

“Put it on center!” Crystal called. The middle of the room lit up with a holographic display, and a countdown until the feed went live.

“Find out where this is coming from. And work on a way to cut the feed if we need to.”

The broadcast started. A man in a white robe sat on a large white throne. His face was glowing white, like its own light source, making his facial features unrecognizable.

“The end is nigh.” Boomed a voice that made Crystal shiver. Not because of its deep resonance that penetrated her bones, but because the voice that once whispered things that made her knees weak with lustful anticipation was laced with poisonous hatred.

Crystal had first met Dante while she was studying for actuarial cosmology exams. She had stepped outside of the university library to get a bit of fresh air, and a crowd was watching a man floating in the air.

Dante was drama incarnate. From his elevated perch he presented the play “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead”, contorting his body and face to assume the various roles. At one point, his eyes connected with hers as he delivered a line “There's nothing more unconvincing than an unconvincing death.”

Following the performance, they began a courtship that made the rest of the universe seem insignificant. Breathless, in blankets tangled in knots, she'd fall asleep to his stories. She would emerge from her dreams into another, awakened by Oberon's kiss or the caress of a god enchanted by her mortal beauty.

Yet, like a slow sickness, his sweet nothings were replaced by zealous rants. She would return from Illumin, eager to share the fruits of her work, hoping to uncover new villains and heroes in the great galactic library. Dante was often critical, and could easily reference a classic play, poem, or prose that told her stories better.

He'd disappear for lengths of time, returning colder after each trip. He wouldn't speak much about it, and then would fly off the handle in rants about the plights of the oppressed. His literary references shifted from *Wuthering Heights* to *The Heart of Darkness*.

More than anything, Dante despised Illumin's voyeurism, whereas Crystal saw its power to heal. Their schism widened, until Dante ultimately left her with his typical dramatic flair.

“I once would have crossed the stars for you,” his eyes watering as he stood in her doorway, “but now the other side of the universe doesn't seem to be far enough away.”

That icy dagger wrecked Crystal for a long time. She poured herself into her work, and found her own strength. She thought she would never see him again. Yet, here he was, or at least his digital likeness, glowing like a god in Crystal's cathedral.

“Beings of the galaxy, today you answer for your sins.” Dante began, orating like a fundamentalist fire and brimstone preacher. Crystal gathered a few of the brightest workers.

“Can we override his feed?” She asked.

“Not with the damage the station has taken.”

“Can we trace the origin of the broadcast?”

“Possibly, but if he was smart, he’d route it through proxies.”

“Find him. He has to be tapped into our network, it has the widest reach. If we can find where his feed is originating from we can disrupt it.” The workers scattered to various terminals. Crystal ran her fingers through her hair. What would she do when she found him? She turned her attention back to Dante’s tirade.

“You were granted the gift of seeing your origins, bearing witness to the birth and death of stars, the forge of the cosmos that leads to all life. The pattern unfolds similarly from there, your telescopes eventually find signs of life and you are no longer alone. This is a terrifying and inspiring thought. You are not alone. Connective technology emerges, and you make contact. If this is where things ended, you would not need this day of reckoning, but you are corrupt and perverted and selfish, and your time has come.”

Half listening, Crystal racked her brain, trying to think of what Dante’s plan might be. What sort of punishment could he accomplish that would affect life forms across space? Thankfully, Dante loved to hear himself talk, so she knew he would milk this opportunity to deliver a monologue for the ages.

Images and animated projections began to appear around Dante as he grew more frenetic in his speech.

“Do you know the dark underside of your reality? Are you aware to the degree of which the things you see are lies? In this universe are all sorts of beings, but all the ones you know about share the same vile trait. They are exploiters! Whenever a new contact is made, they are assessed in one of three ways - friend, foe, or food. Foes are either eliminated preemptively or converted to friends, and I use that term lightly. It is more like a symbiotic relationship, an arrangement made by necessity and strategy, rather than through love and amity. The societies in the universe that are passive, that live in congruous harmony with their world, become food for

the machine. Whole planets have been wasted in order to construct your portals. Labor camps in asteroid fields are populated with lovely creatures, who don't have a bone of resistance in their bodies. These things have been hidden from you, kept in the dark so you can continue to have the fuel you need to fatten yourselves further and to lose yourselves in the theater of the grotesque."

The words pierced Crystal like arrows. Was it true? Was her life and mission bathed in bloodshed? She thought about the vetting process each of her transmission proposals went through to make sure they were 'marketable' and of high 'quality.' She had lobbied for more transmissions around scientific discoveries, like when a population learns how to make light, or makes a breakthrough in communication technology. A few got through, most were turned down.

"And what have you done with your gifts?" Dante continued. "Why are the top broadcasts voyeuristic cinema? You get off on watching civilizations kill each other in their great wars, guising it as reminders of history, and pertinent to understanding a society's coming of age. Or you simply waste away in debauchery. How many of you frequently tune into the 10,000 year orgy on Byzanti to see what sort of saultry acts the mutligenitalled creatures are doing to each other? The ability to see the beauty of the universe has been reduced to the banal level of bloodshed and sex. You are all unworthy."

Crystal tried to reason with herself, to fight off Dante's allegations. Surely, the broadcasts have been good for the universe. There has been progress in technology, in health, and certainly entertainment. New beings have brought new language, new religions, new art, new music, new athletic competitions.

Her thoughts were disrupted by one of the Cerulean technicians tapping her on the shoulder. Their skin swirled with bioluminescent blue.

"It isn't live," the Cerulean remarked, "it is a recording."

"How do you know?" Crystal inquired.

"There are millions of broadcast origins. If it was a connected live feed there would be little distortions, lags across the different viewing regions. It's all smooth and synchronous. It's an impressive feat, must have taken years to set up. It's foolproof too, there isn't a singular source of origin."

"Good work. That actually helps us. We can start an outreach campaign to as many locations as we can to disable or take over their local transmissions."

The Cerulean's colors went pale. "There's something else."

“Go ahead.”

“There’s a second signal that is tracing the first. It’s similar to one we use to collect viewer sentiment from the broadcast, except it’s backwards and it has been growing in strength.”

“What do you think it is?” Crystal asked, not really sure she wanted to hear the answer.

“I think Dante is going to fry everyone’s brains. A strong microwave pulse could be blasted to every viewer and it would be lights out.”

“Dear God.” Crystal was sure it was her imagination, but she suddenly felt a new itch inside her brain. She was terrified by the prospect of such a massive and heinous act, her mind raced to think of something, but it felt squeezed by the ominous threat. Dante’s droning didn’t help either.

“I am only accelerating the inevitable.” Dante boasted. “Are you aware of the actuarial cosmologists? These individuals study the narratives of cultures to predict the course of their existence. They predict success and failure, and some help predict compliance and subservience. However, have you ever asked them to forecast the future of your own society? If you did, you will find out the visceral truth of your parasitic existence. Without the consumption of other resources, you will cease to exist. Absent the perpetuation of exploitation, you descend into chaos, your systems collapse and if you don’t kill each other, you will slowly waste away. In some ways, expediting your fate is an act of mercy. Once the exploiters are extinguished, the universe can return to its natural order, and the beings that want to live in the universe as it is, without manipulating or distorting their world can have a secured existence. From my throne in the center of the universe, I will end the reign of hell and restore the kingdom of heaven.”

Suddenly, Crystal realized she knew where Dante was, and a plan formed in her mind. She called over a small team, and they scrambled to execute her idea. They had one chance to stop Armageddon.

Dante sat at a bar in Wallace Idaho, the self-proclaimed center of the universe. His love for the dramatic admired the hubris of the town's claim. The bartender and patrons, like countless conscious beings throughout the galaxy, were all fixated on his recorded transmission. They were totally unaware that the person ranting on the broadcast was actually among them sitting in their midst, sipping on a belgian brew called El Fin Du Monde and crunching on peanut shells.

A familiar voice whispered in his ear, startling him.

"So the author of the end of times chooses a town that called itself the center of the universe as a marketing ploy to be his viewing spot. Ego begets ego."

"So nice to have company." Dante motioned Crystal to the stool next to him. The rest of the bar was still oblivious, hypnotized by the deliverance of judgment raining down on them. Dante's avatar was now picking apart each species' shortcomings one by one, punctuating each condemnation with lines from Shakespeare, Sophocles and Shaw.

"I already know the answer, but is there any way to call this off?" Crystal inquired.

"Even if I wanted to, what has been set in motion is irreversible." Dante said.

"I figured." Crystal looked at Dante for a while, searching for any sign of remorse, or sorrow, any inkling of guilt. She saw none. But there was also no trace of pleasure or joy. Neither was there anger or malice. Dante was stoic, expressionless, dutiful. For someone who had spent so many moments contorting his visage into something theatrical, the dullness was particularly unsettling.

"Is there any love left in your heart?" Crystal asked Dante.

"Love?" Dante spat. "Love is a tool of conquest, an illusion that masquerades as something noble, but is as destructive as anything else. I have no place for love. There is only pure existence. Agendaless being."

"Oh Dante, my heart breaks for you. You have become so calloused that you are blind. The beings of this universe are indeed capable of evil, terrible, destructive things. Perhaps this ugliness is even inescapable. But to deny the other side, to ignore the capacity to bring light and love to each other, is to miss one of the most profound and powerful forces the universe has ever created." Crystal's eyes began to water.

“You are blind.” Dante retorted. “You call it intelligent life, but it is all ignorant life. Ignorant of the heartbeats of the stars. Your belief in love is superstition, fairy tale stuff, a fabrication used to justify the meaningless suffering caused by your hands. The only way forward is a clean slate. It is inevitable. Why did you come here anyway? You won’t change my mind. You can’t stop what is about to happen.”

“But I already did.” Crystal said. At that moment, every person in the bar looked in their direction. The viewer apparatuses on their heads were all glowing, and beams of light emanated from their eyes, shining like spotlights on Dante.

“I don’t understand!” Dante cried, raising his hands in front of his face, trying to shield away the piercing rays of light. “How?”

“We added our own broadcast, simultaneous with yours, ‘Illumin presents Universal Love.’ And for a little bonus we hacked the energy from your deathly surprise. With our little tweak, we have changed viewers into transmitters. They don’t just receive your signal, they can project it.”

“It burns!” Shrieked Dante. The intense concentrations of light beams were catching his clothes on fire.

“Pause secondary transmission.” Crystal commanded. The light beams switched off. Dante patted out smoldering parts of his clothing, and tried to catch his breath. Crystal walked toward him, wetting a napkin to assist him.

“Unlike you,” Crystal said in a calm, measured voice, wiping his brow, “I can show mercy. I can forgive. Look at what can happen when the universe is united, when they are all motivated to preserve their loved ones.”

“Motivated by fear.” Dante looked around the room. “Without the fear of being destroyed, they would never unite. All you have proven is the laws of self preservation by any means necessary. And you cannot escape your ultimate fate. You cannot escape your true nature. You thwarted my plans this time, but I will never relent in my goal to rid the universe of powers that only pursue gains at the expense of others.”

“Dante, again you prove that you are looking at the universe through the wrong lens,” Crystal said, “The audience already knew they were safe. There was no influence of fear. They all chose this new broadcast because they are drawn to love.”

Dante flared his nostrils, his breath ragged. He lunged at Crystal, wrapping his hands around her throat. She tried to fight him off, clawing at his hair and hands, but he was a man possessed.

“Resume secondary transmission” Crystal cried hoarsely.

Immediately, a shower of light beams cascaded onto Dante and he screamed as their intensity seared his skin. The energy fields from the projections caused lights in the bar to spark and strobe. In order to protect himself, Dante used Crystal as a shield, thrusting her in front of his body. All the light was concentrated on them and with a singular burst, there was a flash of blinding whiteness.

In that moment, the only thing anyone could see was Crystal’s silhouette, arms wide, hands open to the heavens. When the flash faded, her sacrificial shadow was burned into the back of the viewers’ eyes.

The light beams coming from the eyes of the crowd turned off. And in the waning red rays of a setting sun shining through the bar windows, viewers took off their headset to survey the scene.

Dante was on his knees, wailing and weeping. Unable to see, his hands searched the empty air in front of him for the person he had just been holding. He would never find her. No one ever would.

A pair of snowflakes floated through Wallace Idaho, meandering their way through the air currents, weaving around each other in a silent ballet until silently settling on the bar at the center of the universe. More snow fell, and fell, and fell, until the entire town was draped in a white blanket of ice crystals, glittering in the moonlight like tiny shards of shattered stars.

End of Broadcast