

The League Home Defense Fleet was being ripped apart in orbit of Enith'Tas. Ships split in half, depressurized or collapsed into a micro-singularity every minute, venting out the Ytrellan crew into the cold void of space. They died like the insects they are, their wings torn and their bodies curled up into balls.

A Ytrellan battleship fired off a desperate salvo while its bow melted under a beam of concentrated tachyon particles. It's finished off by a slew of torpedoes hitting its starboard side, the sleek, needle-like, enemy fighters that fired them too fast for its flak cannons to track.

The vessels responsible for the carnage advanced slowly, clinically. They were as majestic as they were unnerving, made of incomprehensible gray metal that shifted and shimmered.

As one Ytrellan formation crumbled over their homeworld another entered the system from the hyperlanes in a flash of blue light. They rapidly advanced to meet their allies at full throttle. But just behind the great gas giant Enith, nestled in the rocks of its small ring system, something already waited for them.

"The Ytrellanids have what the sociology division calls a 'hard gun-line naval culture'." A disciplined female voice crackled from the intercom of a fighter. "They're so physiologically averse to conflict that when they do fight it's from as far a distance as possible. They possess artillery that can fire from half an astronomical unit away, strong thrusters to flee if anything gets too close- Lumi, are you even listening?"

"Partially." Came the irrepentant reply.

The young woman had her legs perched on the console of her fighter, her helmet strewn on the floor. She had sharp facial features and a smattering of freckles along her cheekbones. The exact same as everyone else she's ever known. Her long, warm orange hair floated in the low gravity of the cockpit. It was the only thing junior researchers like her could change about their appearance.

“Well, you should be listening fully. We only have a few minutes before we engage.”

“And what are you going to tell us that we don’t already know, Hypatia?” Lumi droned as she checked on her nails. “I’ve studied the stratagem against these...insects dozens of times while we were in FTL. Everyone else did as well, it’s in our nature.”

“Then enlighten us to what our battleplan is then? If you’re oh so confident.”

Another voice cut in, a bloodthirsty echo of Lumi’s boredom and Hypatia’s focus. “We get up close and personal. Their cannons are powerful, I’ll give them that. They can damage the hulls of even our ships. But they’re hard to aim and useless against small targets, like fighters. Which is why we’re waiting in an asteroid field to euthanize them.”

“You know, I don’t have the faintest idea why you haven’t joined up with Director Phoenix yet, Saber.” Lumi deadpanned. “You’d fit right in one of the engineering division’s hardsuits, scorching worlds like the psychopath you are.”

She was always a little scared of Saber, though she would loathe to admit that. Most of the copies like her drive themselves insane as their kill count surpasses the thousands and they have to be “repurposed” sooner or later. Lumi hoped she wouldn’t be there to witness it.

“The Cosmology Division appeals to my brand of destruction more. Sure shattering a planet’s fun and all but there are still pieces of it left. If that same planet is thrown into a black hole, nothing will remain.” Saber took a deep, almost reverent, breath.

“It’s annihilation perfected.”

“Cut the chatter please. Ytrellan reinforcements are almost in striking distance. We’re the first to attack. Other squadrons will join in momentarily.” The sound of Hypatia’s fingers snapping crackled on the intercom.

“Lumi, helmet on. Now.”

“How did you even know it was off?” Lumi said as she gathered her hair and donned her helmet. A flurry of screens flickered to life the moment it sealed on her neck. Weapon statuses, targeting computers. A holographic map with detailed positions of enemy and friendly ships and so much more. The minds of lesser people would be overwhelmed. But to a descendant of the First Intellect, it was a little under stimulating.

“You are me, I am you. We are all iterations of the same perfect being.” Hypatia began to recite the mantra of their people.

All members of their society, created with a flawless mind. To do with as they please.

“As the mirrors of a perfect being, let nothing stand between us and comprehension.” Saber continued.

The pursuit of a flawless being is the pursuit of knowledge. The desires of the flawed cannot interfere with the will of the flawless.

“Lest we be consumed by ignorance.” Lumi finished.

The secrets of the universe, their birthright. No matter the cost.

The enemy ships have moved into engagement range. Lumi began to accelerate her fighter, weapon systems buzzing to life. Dozens of other fighters emerge from the asteroid belt with her. And the final destruction of Enith'Tas' defenses began.

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Lumi rushed past two broken Ytrellan ships. Her twin-linked plasma cannons unleashed a barrage of searing energy that burnt through the hull of another hostile vessel.

It was a perfect ambush. Half of the League relief force was neutralized before their cannons could fire a single shot, which were easily evaded. As Hypatia, Lumi, and Saber smashed into the enemy fleet head on, more fighters darted out of the asteroids at the rear and flanks. They disassembled, disrupted, destroyed.

To the Ytrelan Trade League, experiencing this battle was akin to being flayed alive. The worst military defeat in their history, the kind of defeat that will be immortalized in their social consciousness for centuries.

To the Directorate, it was like smashing a particularly ornery colony of ants.

“So how many ships have you two destroyed?” Saber asked with manic glee, as she flew through the elegant control tower of yet another Ytrelan vessel. “Not enough if you ask me. But I will gladly pick up your slack.”

“I really think you’re overdoing it today.” Lumi commented as she double checked her ship computer’s firing solutions. Just as she scanned around for another victim several small red dots blinked to life in the holo-map at the corner of her vision. They originated from four large enemy vessels far from the battlefield. Strike craft carriers.

“Oh no.” She said, rolling her eyes. “They’ve managed to launch fighters. We’re ruined.”

“An unexpected variable.” Hypatia responded. “But not an unwelcome one. Let’s peel off and deal with them before anyone else can.”

“That should make today at least somewhat interesting.” Lumi said.

“Following your lead.”

“You didn’t even have to ask.” Saber joined in.

With that Lumi shifted her engines into overdrive and sped towards the energy signatures of Hypatia and Saber’s fighters. She weaved past the

smoldering wrecks of Ytrelan ships and the other friendly fighters in the engagement, heedless of if her maneuvering interfered with them or not.

“Seriously!” A copy (whose name Lumi didn’t care to remember) screamed in a trilly voice as her meticulously calculated attack run was ruined. “If you do this again I’m going straight to the Director!”

“By all means, try.” Lumi taunted as she cut the feed and continued on. An empty threat from an inferior mind.

In an extravagant barrel roll she slotted herself in between the other two members of her triune just before they closed with the enemy. Dozens out of the sixty or so enemy fighters were atomized before they could fire a single shot.

The Ytrelan craft were outclassed in every conceivable metric. The tungsten tipped rounds of their rotary cannons plunked uselessly on the silver metal of the Directorate fighters. Their rocket propelled thrusters couldn’t provide enough speed compared to those of dark matter engines. The pilots weren’t trained from birth to destroy as proficiently as they discovered and learned.

In minutes two of the three super advanced fighters destroyed the last hostile and bared down on the carriers themselves. Saber’s going so fast the metal of her ship started to melt.

“All mine!” She laughed. “I’m not letting you score a single kill!”

“Like I would allow that!” Hypatia growled and set her engines to full, lightly melting the hull of her fighter in the same way her colleague’s was.

Lumi couldn’t help but glance at them from a distance. Her fighter was completely stopped. She was focused on something different.

The corpse of a Ytrellan pilot. The butterfly-like alien floated cold and still in front of the window of Lumi's cockpit. She was about to leave and go after the carriers, yes. But this caught her attention in a way that made her feel uncomfortable.

Its dead compound eyes stared at her. Every one of its thousands of ommatidia dull and hollow. Lumi wondered what kind of life it led before it met her in battle. If her readings into Ytrellan society were anything to go by, it emerged from its chrysalis next to a lake of clearest water, and spent its pre-sapient years pollinating fields of endless flowers and drinking the dew from blades of grass. When it gained self awareness it was automatically hired by the League and given everything it needed to survive. Housing, healthcare, and a life's purpose of their choosing.

This Ytrellan chose to defend its home, from the cockpit of a fighter no less. It endured many months of its mere twenty year lifespan undergoing psychological conditioning to fight in any capacity. They hadn't developed the aptitude of conflict humanity did. Or they did. And now it was dead, along with all the other Ytrellans that resisted them this day.

'What a waste.' Lumi thought.

Before she could ponder further her ship sensors detected a massive energy signature entering the system. Far larger than anything currently involved in the battle. It emerged from the hyperlanes directly behind the Ytrellan carriers. It had several sharp spires on its back and its core housed a small singularity. Both as a means of propulsion and as a weapon. It dwarfed the enemy ships and blocked out the shadow of the system's star.

Hypatia and Saber's fighters stop instantly.

DSV: Event Horizon, the map on Lumi's hud identified. Also known as the pride of the Cosmology Division's fleet, the Director's flagship, and to those unfortunate enough to be its targets, the Stellar Devourer. It's not an official

name of course. But an aggregate of the names its victims have called it before they met their end.