

ASYMMETRICAL WARFARE

So you want to be a star?

BY S. R. ALGERNON

Time: Contact + 0.2 nano Galactic Years

The battle is joined! Our first volley neutralized their coastal cities and orbital grid. A lesser race would have capitulated, knowing itself to be outmatched, but Earth fired back with chemical rockets and atomics. We lost one orbiter and six surface reconnaissance craft. This race shows every sign of predatory genetic stock. Their progeny will make fine additions to the Galactic Legion.

How I wish I could be in their place right now, to see the cosmic battlefield with young eyes.

Time: Contact + 0.45 nano Galactic Years

The Earth drones and missiles held us off for a surprisingly long time, but we have encircled their bases. I have ordered our sub-commanders to use beam and blade only, so that we may preserve the fallen. This race is young — perhaps too young to face conquest — but in their hearts they are ready. Natural selection will take them the rest of the way.

Time: Contact + 0.68 nano Galactic Years

I have seen with my own eyes the first of the fallen Earth commanders. The body repulses me and casts a pall on the entire campaign. Despite the prominence of star insignias on most of their vessels, the Earthers are not star-shaped. They are, in fact, biologically identical to the ones who live out in the open, whom we had assumed to be a slave race. I beg you, General, not to tell the Council. They will declare this conquest an abomination and force me from the planet in disgrace.

I am well aware of the Council's ruling that only stellate races have standing to compete, but the Council has never faced these bipeds in battle. They deserve to be lifted onto the Celestial Arena. They are ready for the stars.

I hold out hope that the people of Earth are somehow a degenerate stellate race, and that living on dry land has led their appendages to droop downward. Their future generations will vindicate me.

Time: Contact + 0.8 nano Galactic Years

Fighting has largely ceased. I have conveyed the best of our fallen to the coastlines of Earth. Of our hundred field commanders and strike force leaders, twelve fell in battle. The

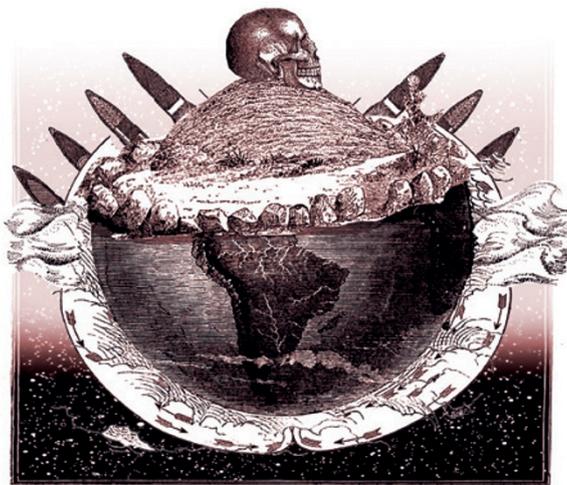


ILLUSTRATION BY JACEY

Earthers mutilated the bodies with projectile weapons — clearly a violation of civilized combat, but they are a young race and deserve some latitude. I have in all cases managed to preserve at least one intact arm or remnant of the central disk. Renewal has begun.

My teams have been scrupulous in preserving the appendages and torso of each fallen Earth commander. We have laid out thousands of bodies along the coastline. The Council will not be so quick to call this conquest an abomination when the harvest comes in.

Time: Contact + 1.0 nano Galactic Years

Something has gone wrong. The fallen of Earth have shown no signs of renewal. It is becoming difficult to prevent their remains from putrefying. We have frozen many of them, while our xenobiologists argue over how best to spur regeneration.

These Earthers are stubborn even in death.

Time: Contact + 1.25 nano Galactic Years

Today brought a hopeful sign. We faced sustained attack from a band of surviving Earth soldiers. They fought with skill and ferocity that exceeded their fallen comrades. I met the leader personally on the field of battle and asked it where it wanted its body to be placed. Surely it would know the optimal location for renewal on its own world.

It told me to go to Hell. I asked for coordinates but did not receive a coherent reply.

I split the body cleanly along the midline,

to give it two chances

at renewal. Afterward,

I let some of the survivors

take the body, to

see what they did with

it. The results have been enlightening. Apparently, Earthers are planted in dry ground, like seeds. We should have suspected as much from a terrestrial species. The survivors fired projectiles into the air and played musical instruments.

Could sound be the key to their regeneration? I will try acoustic stimulation with the remaining bodies.

Time: Contact + 1.65 nano Galactic Years

None of my experiments has succeeded. What if Earthers simply do not renew? How could evolution permit such a disaster? Without regeneration, the ones who fought most bravely would excise themselves from the gene pool, resulting in a timid prey species. The Earthers are not timid.

The Council was right. This is an abomination. The Earthers have led themselves to extinction, and the Council will blame me.

And yet, there is hope. Clearly the Earthers have endured for millions of years. They must renew, even if I cannot yet determine how.

Time: Contact + 2.45 nano Galactic Years

The formal campaign is over, yet a continued insurgency drains our resources. The Earthers attack at night. They befoul our regeneration beds. They drag the bodies onto the beaches and burn them. They disrupt planet-side operations at every opportunity. Our orbiters have detected energy spikes from remote mountain regions. I believe new weapons are being brought to bear.

I understand the Earthers now. I have, it seems, waged war on a prey species, one bred by nature to wait in the shadows. What I mistook for fighting spirit must simply have been this planet's way of weeding out the stubborn and foolhardy. A new generation, more cunning and cautious than the last, rises from the husks of their cities.

I shall stay and fight them, to speed their evolution. It is the least I can do to atone for my mistakes.

If I fall, General, and if you find my body, find a place for me along Earth's coastline and keep the Earthers away somehow while I renew. In my next incarnation, I wish to call this world my home. ■

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