

Getting to Know You

We just didn't understand. Who does really? The war had been going on so long that it was just part of our lives. The war had been happening around me all of my life. It had happened to my father and to his father, and back still further through the generations.

Sometimes the war was overwhelming like when we heard a major system was gone in a massive supernova explosion. Other times the war was just a few people being killed on some obscure planet whose names weren't familiar. Yet, the war was always with us.

There are all sorts of historical accounts about how the hostilities started, but I think no one really knows for sure why we were still at war. Perhaps we were at war simply because we were at war. It makes no sense, but neither do the other explanations.

I guess the strangest thing for me is that it always seemed like we should have been in an interstellar war with some alien species instead of with ourselves. After all, we had been expanding across the galaxy for thousands of years. It just seemed that we would cross paths with some other sentient race that wouldn't take kindly to our colonization and decide it was time we stopped. Strangely that just never happened.

We had encountered other sentient alien species all right. It's just that we never came across one that was interested in the same planets we were. We just had so little in common with any of them except for the fact that we were intelligent species. Mostly we were divided from them over our atmospheric preferences. Some could tolerate earthlike conditions for short times or with proper suits, but none preferred the planets we found to be of most use to us. Likewise we weren't terribly interested in the methane, sulfurous, or near liquid atmospheres of their preferred worlds.

To the credit of every alien species we have met, they don't understand our war either. When we try to explain our ages and ages of fighting they are just unable to comprehend it. The concept of why we would fight with ourselves just escapes them. They see no difference between us that should prompt hostilities. I believe some of them have just concluded we are a crazy species and have decided it's just best to avoid any further contact.

I think that is what happened with the race on Sigma Draconis IV. They are such an elegant race. They are tall and slender with three legs and four arms and a beautiful face except for the compound eyes that are a little unnerving. The fact that they were twelve feet tall would have made them seem intimidating except for their extreme gentleness and patience.

The Sigdracs worked hard at getting to know us... all of us... both sides. If there was ever a race that was genetically predisposed to be psychoanalysts it would be the Sigdracs. They seemed to take us on as a challenge. I think they were certain we were broken and just wanted to fix us. I can't say I disagree with them, but I wish they had been successful. Maybe we are just broken beyond repair.

The Sigdracs spent almost a hundred years working on the problem. They talked with millions of us on both sides of the war. They tried time and time again to arrange negotiations between us, and sometimes we even participated. Sadly, the negotiations never really accomplished anything of substance.

Once in a while after one of the extended negotiation sessions there would be a little bit of a lull in the fighting but these periods would inevitably come to an end. One side or the other would invariably do something that would lead to another round of escalation. We must have frustrated the Sigdracs immensely.

Ultimately the Sigdracs announced that they would no longer work with us and wanted all of us to stay away from them. I can't say I blame them. Our relationship was a one way street and all they ever got from us was a lot of trouble and frustration. I have to give them credit though. They certainly found a unique way to bring our relationship to an end.

After their announcement had time to percolate through all of the star systems on both sides of our war, the Sigdracs just disappeared. I don't mean they left and went somewhere. I mean they lock stock and barrel disappeared right along with their whole star system. Poof. Gone. Oh, we searched the coordinates of their system to see if they were just managing to hide somehow with some kind of shield or cloak, but they were truly gone. We simply have no idea about the magnitude of the power they controlled yet we had driven them right out of their own region of space by our behavior. I think I envy them.

It's funny I didn't really hate our enemy. Oh, I hated what they did to many of us, but then again they probably hated what we had done to them. I wonder if they still hate us? I always thought they must, but I never used to understand why. Personally I'm pretty likable and wouldn't intentionally hurt anybody. I wonder how they see themselves? Something tells me they think they are pretty nice people too but you would find some of us hard to convince of that.

Just the idea that they would commit suicide if it would allow them to take a few of us with them made me shudder. I just didn't understand it. Oh, I understood killing your enemy. I'd had to do some of that myself. I just didn't understand getting yourself killed in the process as being a good thing. It just seemed stupid to me.

Just last month we received the news that an enemy cruiser with a crew of about fifty attacked Refit Station 27 orbiting Tau Alpha. The refit station had a crew of about a hundred and there were about another hundred crewmen there. Those hundred were skeleton crews of the three ships that were being refurbished. Refit stations aren't heavily armed, but they are massive and reasonably safe from most attacks. I guess the captain of the cruiser knew that as well. So, instead of firing weapons at the refit station, he rammed his whole vessel completely through the station. There were no survivors on either side. Like I said, it was just stupid.

Maybe they thought we were stupid for not having had a battle cruiser guarding the station. I think it just never occurred to us that there was a need. After all, what threat was a commercial refit station to them? All that those stations do is service and repair freighters. All of the people killed on our side were civilians who weren't even connected to the war effort. The enemy must have felt there was some connection though, but they don't seem to understand us any better than we understood them.

We had seen broadcasts from the enemy star systems from time to time. Training our high gain receivers on them was kind of wasteful of time and money so it wasn't done often. Normally it happened after they had been successful in one of their attacks and our curiosity got the best of us. Maybe it was morbid curiosity that caused us to want to see what their reaction was to what they had done. What we saw was invariably sickening.

In the broadcasts we saw young people cheering and laughing because some of our people had been killed. I didn't understand that. I've never been inclined to laugh or cheer when any of their people had been killed. Mostly it just made me sad and angry. I always felt that the deaths on either side were such a waste and that made me sad. Then it made me angry that anyone had been educated to believe that the death of another is ever something to laugh and be happy about. Whenever I had been responsible for any of their deaths I had at times been happy that we succeeded, but had never been happy that they died. I wonder if they understand the difference.

It was my responsibility to lead the team that swept through system HD 209458 about 150 light years from earth. It was one of the first times that I had acted as a supreme mission commander, and at the time I believed I was prepared for the responsibility. I had been on many previous campaigns, and had served under some of the best supreme commanders ever to lead a mission. I learned immensely from each of them, but some things you only learn by doing.

Less than a month before we entered the system we had suffered a major blow at Cestus III. The enemy had made a surprise direct attack on Cestus itself causing it to go nova and killing everyone in the system including themselves. Over five hundred million people died that day. So as we approached HD 209458 there was only one thing on our minds. We wanted revenge and there were three inhabited planets in this system. All of them were occupied by our enemy.

We entered the system under my command with ten thousand battleships all using the latest techniques to mask our approach. They were techniques we had picked up from the enemy, and we used them to full advantage. We were so close by the time they detected us that the first planet was reduced to a smoldering cinder without even being able to raise their defenses or launch a counter attack. In less than ten hours the planet was rendered totally uninhabitable forevermore. Before our attack we estimated the population at over one hundred and fifty million. After the attack the population was zero.

As we approached the second planet they had time to raise their defenses, but it did them little good. We did have casualties but that was to be expected. Twelve battleships with their entire crew complement were lost. Still, the final outcome was yet another smoldering cinder fifteen hours later.

Of course the third planet was the most difficult. They had plenty of advance warning of our approach. Not only did they have their defenses at full readiness, but they massed two hundred attack cruisers. The battle waged on for over thirty hours. We lost nine hundred and seventy two battleships with all hands. They lost their entire planet. When we departed there were no life signs anywhere in the system. We had our revenge.

We didn't cheer over their loss of over six hundred million people. Sure we were saddened over the loss of our own people, but it was more than that.

We had entered this system not fully understanding our enemy. We didn't understand how they could blow a whole system away in a nova explosion. We didn't understand how they could condemn hundreds of millions of people including their own to the most incredibly brutal deaths. We didn't understand their hatred of us. The command staffs and crew of our nine thousand and sixteen ships left that system changed from the way we had entered it.

As we were leaving the system a charred ruin, I had time to think over what had happened, and consider the orders I had given in those last few days. I also considered the willingness with which those under my command had responded and the results of their obedience to their supreme commander for this mission. It was a sobering thought. I had always considered myself a good person, one who wouldn't willingly hurt anyone. Yet in the matter of a few days I had been directly responsible for the death of over half a billion people. I could almost hear the mental gears in my mind grinding as they tried to rationalize what had happened. Finally I knew what I had to do.

The following day I contacted the command staffs of the other nine thousand and fifteen ships as well as the command staff of my own ship. I explained to them what I had been thinking and the conclusions I had drawn and what I felt that I must do. I then asked them to

think through what I had said and pass it along to their crews for discussion so that they might choose what they wished to do as well.

Over the subsequent three days we made arrangements to accommodate everyone. The battle group was split into two groups with different destinations. There were two thousand one hundred and twelve ships in the first group and six thousand nine hundred and four ships in the second group. I was to lead one group and as it turned out my second in command was to lead the other. He had family back home and I did not.

Those in our group had decided that they had learned something in this last battle that they never thought was possible. We had finally understood the enemy, and for us this demanded a change. As the two groups separated and began heading for their different destinations we realized we would miss them, but we knew that we could not go with them. Each of us understood that we had gotten to know the enemy by becoming the enemy and we could never go home again. We had to go where we could forget what we had become so our six thousand nine hundred and four ships set course in the opposite direction.