

# CARTHAGO DELEND A EST

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Valentine says that her favorite parts of old war movies are the nights before or the moments between battles, when tension is building and character is revealed in the short silences between engagements. This story sprang from the concept of this overnight waiting presented on a galactic scale; what happens after hundreds of years of waiting for something, based on a beautiful promise?

## CARTHAGO DELENDA EST

Wren Hex-Yemenni woke early. They had to teach her everything from scratch, and there wasn't time for her to learn anything new before she hit fifty and had to be expired.

"Watch it," the other techs told me when I was starting out. "You don't want a Hex on your hands."

By then we were monitoring Wren Hepta-Yemenni. She fell into bed with Dorado ambassador 214, though I don't know what he did to deserve it and she didn't even seem sad when he expired. When they torched him she went over with the rest of the delegates, and they bowed or closed their eyes or pressed their tentacles to the floors of their glass cases, and afterwards they toasted him with champagne or liquid nitrogen.

Before we expired Hepta, later that year, she smiled at me. "Make sure Octa's not ugly, okay? Just in case—for 215."

Wren Octa-Yemenni hates him, so it's not like it matters.



It's worse early on. Octa and Dorado 215 stop short of declaring war—no warring country is allowed to meet the being from Carthage when it arrives, those are the rules—but it comes close. Every time she goes over to the Dorado ship she comes back madder. Once she got him halfway into an airlock before security arrived.

We reported it as a chem malfunction; I took the blame for improper embryonic processes (a lie—they were perfect), and the Dorado accepted the apology, no questions. Dorado 208 killed himself, way back; they know how mistakes can happen.

Octa spends nights in the tech room, scanning through footage of

Hepta-Yemmeni and Dorado 214 like she's looking for something, like she's trying to remember what Hepta felt.

I don't know why she tries. She can't; none of them can. They don't hold on to anything. That's the whole point.



The astronomers at the Institute named the planet Carthage when they discovered it floating in the Oort cloud like a wheel of garbage. They thought it was already dead.

But the message came from there. It's how they knew to look in the cloud to begin with; there was a message there, in every language, singing along the light like a phone call from home.

It was a message of peace, they say. It's confidential; most people never get to hear it. I wouldn't even believe it's real except that all the planets heard it, and agreed—every last one of them threw a ship into the sky to meet the ship from Carthage when it came.



Every year they show us the video of Wren Alpha-Yemenni—the human, the original—taking the oath. Stretched out behind her are the ten thousand civilians who signed up to go into space and not come back, to cultivate a meeting they'd never see.

"I, Wren Alpha-Yemenni, delegate of Earth, do solemnly swear to speak wisely, feel deeply, and uphold the highest values of the human race as Earth greets the ambassador of Carthage." At the end she smiles, and her eyes go bright with tears.

The speech goes on, but I just watch her face.

There's something about Alpha that's . . . more alive than the copies. They designated her with a letter just to keep track, but it suits her anyway—the Alpha, the leader, the strong first. Octa has a little of that, sometimes, but she'll probably be expired by the time Carthage comes, and who knows if it will ever manifest again.

Octa would never be Alpha, anyway. There's something in Alpha's eyes that's never been repeated—something bright and determined; excited; happy.

It makes sense, I guess. She's the only one of the Yemennis who chose to go.



Everybody sent ships. Everybody. We'd never heard of half the planets that showed up. You wonder how amazing the message must be, to get them all up off their asses.

Dorado was in place right away (that whole planet is kiss-asses), which is why they were already on iteration 200 when we got there. Doradoan machines have to pop out a new one every twenty years. (My ancestors did better work on our machines; they generate a perfect Yemenni every fifty years on the dot—except for poor Hex. There's always one dud.) Dorado spends their time trying to scrounge up faster tech or better blueprints, and we give our information away, because those were the rules in the message, but they just take—they haven't given us anything since their dictionary.

WX-16 from Sextans-A sent their royal house: an expendable younger son and his wife and a collection of nobles, to keep the bloodline active until the messenger arrived. We don't deal with them—they think it's coarse to clone.

NGC 2808 (we can't pronounce it, and sometimes it's better not to try) came out of Canis Major and surprised everyone, since we didn't even think there was life out there. They've only been around a few years; Hepta never met them. Their delegate is in stasis. Whenever that poor sucker wakes up he's going to have some unimpressed ambassadors waiting to meet him. They should never have come with only one.

Xpelhi, who booked it all the way from Cygnus, keep to themselves; their atmosphere is too heavy for people with spines. They look like jellyfish, no mouths, and it took us a hundred and ten years to figure out their language; the dictionary they sent us was just an anatomical sketch. Hepta cracked it because of something Tetra-Yemenni had recorded about the webs of their veins shifting when they were upset. The Xpelhi think we're a bunch of idiots for taking so long. Which is fine; I think they're a bunch of mouthless creeps. It evens out.

Neptune sent a think-tank themselves, like they were a real planet and not an Earth colony. They've never said how they keep things going on

that tiny ship, if it's cloning or bio-reproduction or what; every generation they elect someone for the job, and I guess whenever Carthage shows up they'll put forward the elected person and hope for the best. Brave bunch, Neptune. Better them than us.

Centauri was the smartest planet. They sent an AI. You know the AI isn't sitting up nights worrying itself into early expiration. It's not bothered by a damn thing.



Octa makes rounds to all the ships. She's the only one of them who does it, and it works. Canis Major sent us help once, when we had the ventilation problem on the storage levels. She didn't ask for help; they're not obligated to share anything but information. But when she came back, an engineer was with her.

"Trust me, I know everything about refrigeration," he said, and after the computer had translated the joke everybody laughed and shook his hand.

Octa stood beside him like a mother until they had taken him into the tunnels, and then she tucked her helmet under her arm like she was satisfied.

"They're good people," she said to the shuttle pilot, who was making a face. "With no ambassador to keep them going, they must feel so alone. Give them a chance to do good."

"I've got the scan ready," I said. (I scan her every time she comes back from somewhere else. It's a precaution. You never know what's going on outside your own ship.)

"Let's be quick, then," she said, already walking down the corridor. "I have to make some notes, and then I need to talk to Centauri."

(Centauri's AI is Octa's favorite ship; she's there far more often than she needs to be. "Easier to come to decisions when it's just a matter of facts," she said.)

Octa did a lot of planning, early on, like she had a special purpose beyond what Alpha had promised—like time was short.

Of all the copies, she was the only one who ever seemed to worry that her clock was ticking down.



All the Yemennis have been different, which is unavoidable. Even though each one has all the aggregated information of previous iterations without the emotional hangover, it can get messy, like Hepta and Dorado 214. Human error in every copy. It's the reason her machines all have parameters instead of specs; some things you never can tell. (Poor Hex.)

It's hard on them, of course—after fifty years it all starts to fall apart no matter what you do, and you have to shut one down and start again—but it's the best way we have to give her a lifetime of knowledge in a few minutes, and we don't want Carthage to come when we're unprepared.

I don't know what's in the memories, what they show her each time she wakes. That's for government guys; techs mind their own business.



There's a documentary about how they picked Alpha for the job, four hundred years back. One man went on and on about "the human aesthetic," and put up a photo of what a woman would look like if every race had an influence in the facial features.

"Almost perfect. It's like they chose her for her looks!" he says, laughing.

Like Carthage is going to know if she's pretty. Carthage is probably full of big amoebas, and when they meet her they'll just think she's nasty and fragile and full of teeth.

They have a picture of Alpha up in the lab anyway, for reference. No one looks at it any more—nobody needs to. When I look in the mirror, I see a Yemenni first, and then my own face. I have my priorities straight.

Wren Yemenni is why we're here, and the reason none of us have complained in four hundred years is because she knows what she owes us. She's seen the video, too, with those ten thousand people who gave up everything because someone told them the message was beautiful.

No matter what her failings are, she tries to learn everything she can each time, to move diplomacy forward, to be kind (except to Dorado 215, but we all hate those ass-kissers so it doesn't matter). She knows what she's here to do. It's coded deeper than her IQ, than her memories, somewhere

inside her we can't even reach; duty is built into their bones. Alpha passed down something wonderful, to all of them.

Octa doesn't look like Alpha. Not at all.



Just before Dorado 215 hits his twenty-year expiration, he messages a request that Octa accompany him on an official visit to the Xpelhi. There's something he wants to show them; he thinks they'll be interested.

Everyone asks her to go when they have to talk to Xpelhi. We gave everyone the code once we cracked it (we promised to exchange information, fair and square), but no one else is good at it and they need the help. The Yemmenis have a knack for language.

"I hate him," she says as I strap her into her suit. (It's new—our engineers made it to withstand the pressure in the Xpelhi ship. It's the most amazing human tech we've ever produced. Earth will be proud when they get the message.)

"If peace didn't require me to go. . ." she says, frowns. "I hope they see that what he's offering won't help anyone. It never does."

She sounds tired. I wonder if she's been up nights with the playback again.

"It's okay," I say. "You can hate him if you want. No one expected you to love him like the last one did. It's better not to carry the old feelings around. You live longer."

"He's different," she says. "It's terrible how it's changed him."

"All clones feel that way sometimes," I say. "Peril of the job. Here's your helmet."

She takes it and smiles at me, a thank-you, before she pops it over her head and activates the seal.

"I feel like a snowman," she says, which is what Hepta used to say. I wonder if anyone told Octa, or if she just remembered it from somewhere.

I stay near the bio-med readout while she's on the Xpelhi ship; if anything starts to fail, the suit tells us. If her lungs have collapsed from the pressure there's not much we can do, but at least we'll know, and we can wake up the next one.

Her heart rate speeds up, quick sharp spikes on the readout like

she's having a panic attack, but that happens whenever Dorado 215 says something stupid. After a while it's just a little agitation, and soon she's safely back home.

She stands on the shuttle platform for a long time without moving, and only after I start toward her does she wake up enough to switch off the pressure in the suit and haul her helmet off.

I stop where I am. I don't want to touch her; I've worked too hard on them to handle them. "Everything all right?"

She's frowning into middle space, not really seeing me. "There's nothing on the ship we could use as a weapon?"

Strange question. "I guess we could crash the shuttle into someone," I say. "I can ask the engineers."

"No," she says. "No need."

It was part of the message, the first rule: no war before Carthage comes. We don't even have armed security— just guys who train with their hands, ready in case Octa tries to shove any more people in airlocks.

She hasn't done that in a while. She's getting worn down. It happens to them all, nearer the end.

"There's been no war for four hundred years," she says as we walk, shaking her head. "Have we ever gone that long before without fighting? Any of us?"

"Nope." I grin. "Carthage is the best thing that hasn't happened to us yet."

Her helmet is tucked under one arm, and she looks down at it like it will answer her.



The Delegate Meeting happens every decade. It wasn't mandated by Carthage; Wren Tetra-Yemenni began it as a way for delegates to have a base of reference, and to meet; no one has even seen the new Neptunian Elect since they picked her two years back, and they have to introduce Dorado 216.

We're not allowed to hear what they talk about—it's none of our business, it's government stuff—but we hang around in the hallways just to watch them filing in, the humanoids and the Xpelhis puttering past in their cases. The Centauri AI has a hologram that looks like a stick insect



with wings, and it blinks in and out as the signal from his ship gets spotty. I cover my smile, though—that computer sees everything.

On the way in, Dorado 216 leans over to Octa. “You won’t say anything, will you? It would be war.”

“No,” she says, “I won’t say anything.”

“It’s just in case,” he goes on, like she didn’t already give him an answer. “There’s no plan to use them. We’re not like that—it’s not like that. You never know what Carthage’s plans are, is all.” Then, more quietly, “I trusted you.”

“215 trusted me,” she says. “You want someone to trust you, try the next Yemenni.”

“Watch it,” he says. A warning.

After a second she frowns at him. “How can you want war, after all this effort?”

He makes a suspicious face before he turns and walks into the reception room with the rest of them.

Octa stands in the hall for a second before she follows him, shoulders back and head high. Yemmenis know their duties.



After the Delegate Meeting, Octa takes a trip to the Centauri AI. She’s back in a few hours. She didn’t tell anyone why she was going, just looks sad to have come back.

(Sometimes I think Octa’s mind is more like a computer than any of them, even more than Alpha. I wonder if I made her that way by accident, wishing better for them, wishing for more.)

In the mess, the pilots grumble that it was a waste of shuttle fuel.

“That program shows up anywhere they need it to,” one of them says. “Why did we have to drive her around like she’s one of the queens on Sextan? They should expire these copies before they go crazy, man.”

“Maybe she was trying to give us break from your ugly face,” I say, and there’s a little standoff at the table between the pilots and the techs until one of the language ops guys smoothes things over.

I stay angry for a long time. The pilots don’t know what they’re talking about.

Yemennis do nothing by mistake.



Alpha was the most skilled diplomat on the planet.

They don't say so in the documentary; they talk about how kind she is and how smart she is and how she looks like a mix of everyone, and if you just listened to what they were saying you'd think she hardly deserved to go. There were a lot of people in line; astronauts and prime ministers and bishops all clamoring for the privilege.

And she got herself picked—she got picked above every one of them; she was the most skilled diplomat who ever lived. She could work out anything, I bet.



There's an engineer down five levels who looks good to me, is smart enough, and we get married. We have two kids. (Someone will have to watch over the Yemennis when I'm gone, someone with my grandfathers' talents for calibrating a needle; we've been six generations at Wren Yemmeni's side.)

We celebrate four hundred years of peace. All the delegates put a message together, to be played in every ship, for the civilians. For some of them, it's the first they've heard of the other languages. Everyone on the ship, twelve thousand strong, watches raptly from the big hangar and the gymnasium level, from the tech room and the bridge.

They go one by one, and I recognize our reception room as the camera pans from one face to another. They talk about peace, about their home planets, about how much they look forward to all of us knowing the message, when Carthage comes.

Wren Octa-Yemenni goes last.

"I hope that, as we today are wiser today than we were, so tomorrow we will be wiser than we are," she says. Dorado 216 looks like he wants to slap her.

She says, "I hope that when our time comes to meet Carthage, we may say that we have fulfilled the letter and spirit of its great message, and we stand ready for a bright new age."

Everyone in the tech room roars applause (Yemennis know how to talk to a crowd). Just before the video shuts off, it shows all the delegates side

by side; Octa is looking out the window, towards something none of us can see.



One night, a year before she's due to be expired, I find Octa in the development room. She's watching the tube where Ennea is gestating. Ennea's almost grown, and it looks like Octa's staring at her own reflection.

"Four hundred years without a war," she says. "All of us at a truce, talking and learning. Waiting for Carthage."

"Carthage will come," I promise, glancing at Ennea's pH readout.

"I hope we don't see it," she says, frowns into the glass. "I hope, when it comes, all of us are long dead, and better ones have taken their places. Some people twist on themselves if you give them any time at all."

Deka and Hendeka are in tubes behind us, smaller and reserved, eyes closed; they're not ready. We won't even need them until I'm dead. Though it shouldn't matter, I care less for them than I do for Ennea, less than I do for Octa, who's watching me.

Octa, who seems to think none of them are worthy of Carthage at all. She's been losing faith for years.

None of these copies are like Alpha. They all do their duty, but she *believed*.



At the fifty-year mark, Octa comes in to be expired.

She hands over the recording device, and the government guys disappear to their level to put together the memory flux for Ennea, who will wake up tonight and need to know.

"You shouldn't keep doing this," she tells me as we help her onto the table and adjust the IV.

There are no restraints. The Yemennis don't balk at what they have to do; duty is in their bones. But Octa looks sad, even sadder than when she found out that the one before her had loved someone who was already dead.

"It's fine," I say. "It's the best way—one session of information, and she's ready to face Carthage."

"But she won't remember something if I don't record it? She won't know?"

Octa's always been a little edgy—I try to sound reassuring. "No, she won't feel a thing. Forget Dorado. There's nothing to worry about."

Octa looks like she's going to cry. "What if there's something she needs to know?"

"I'll get you a recorder," I say, and start to hold up my hand for the sound tech, but she shakes her head and grabs my sleeve.

I drop my arm, surprised. No one else has even noticed; they're already starting the machines to wake up the next one, and Octa and I might as well be alone in the room.

After a second she frowns, drops my hand, makes fists at her sides like she's holding back.

The IV drips steadily, and around us everyone is laughing and talking, excited. They seem miles away.

Octa hasn't stopped watching me; her eyes are bright, her mouth drawn.

"Have you seen the message?"

She must know I haven't. I shake my head; I hold my breath, wondering if she's going to tell me. I've dreamed about it my whole life, wondering what Alpha knew that made her cry with joy, four hundred years ago.

"It's beautiful," she says, and her eyes are mostly closed, and I can't tell if she's talking to me or just talking. The IV is working; sometimes they say things.

She says, "I don't know how anyone could take up a weapon again, after seeing the message."

Without thinking, I put my hand over her hand.

She sighs. Then, so quietly that no one else hears, Octa says, "I hope that ship never comes."

Her face gets tight and determined—she looks like Alpha, exactly like, and I almost call out for them to stop—it's so uncanny, something must be wrong.

But nothing is wrong. She closes her eyes, and the bio-feed flatlines; the tech across the room turns off the alarm on the main bank, and it's over.

We flip on the antigrav, and one of the techs takes her down to the incinerator. He comes back, says the other delegates have lined up in

the little audience hall outside the incinerator, waiting to clap and drink champagne.

It's always a long night after an expiration, but it's what we're here to do, and it's good solid work, moving and monitoring and setting up the influx for Yemenni's first night. Nobody wants a delay between delegates. You never know when the Carthage is going to show up. We think another four hundred years, but it could be tomorrow. Stranger things have happened.

Wren Ennea-Yemenni needs to be awake, just in case; she'll have things to do, when Carthage comes.