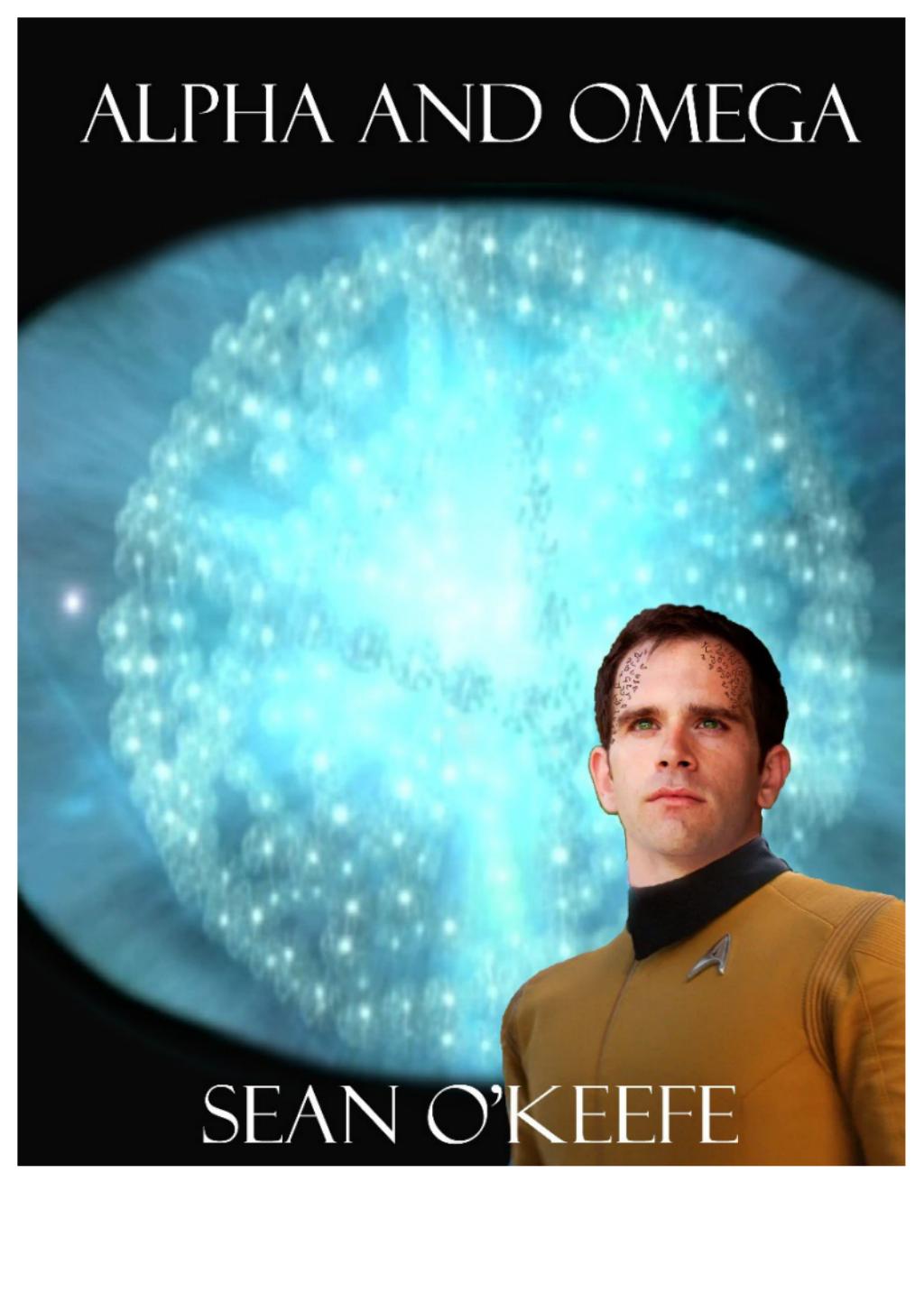


ALPHA AND OMEGA

A man with short brown hair and green eyes, wearing a gold Star Trek uniform with a black turtleneck and a Delta insignia on the collar, stands in front of a glowing, blue, spherical energy field. The energy field is composed of numerous small, white, glowing dots arranged in a roughly spherical pattern, with a bright center. The man is looking slightly to his left. On the right side of his forehead, there is a small, faint graphic of a brain with various symbols and lines drawn on it, suggesting cognitive processes or neural activity.

SEAN O'KEEFE

Alpha and Omega

By Sean O'Keefe 2021©

Cover by Edelweiss O'Keefe

There was always so much to do on this ship. It was a good thing, the Captain thought to himself. Where they were, there wasn't a hell of a lot to do.

Captain Edan Dax strolled through the corridors of the *USS Enterprise-J*. He liked to walk; it kept him fit. The latest Trill to host the Dax symbiote, he was looked upon with great esteem and reverence considering his relative great age. Even though Edan, his host, was only about fifty in Earth years, his symbiote was nearing a thousand. It was an impressive age, even given the long lifespans of the slug-like creatures. Dax mused to himself that, even given what he had learned over the preceding millennia, even he couldn't last forever. Nor would he.

There had been many times when he would, in his spare time, meditate and consider the many lifetimes he had lived. He often drew on memories from years ago and smile. The wisdom of Curzon, the passion and drive of Jadzia, the resilience of Ezri, there were so many lives he had lived. So many memories to get lost in. One thing was true, he never needed to lose himself in the narrative of a holodeck creation. He had plenty of memories of his own.

Edan took the time to smile and, occasionally, to stop and chat with members of his crew, and others. Unlike ships of the Twenty-Third and Twenty-Fourth, the *Enterprise-J* was a flying colony. Her crew was well over a thousand, but she also had many civilians aboard, who worked in their own

businesses, were artisans, writers, hairdressers, and even homemakers and professors. Most of his crew were in committed relationships with someone on board, and Dax knew this created a healthier atmosphere to work in, especially considering their vessel's immensely long journey. Edan had just come from his ship's branch of Starfleet Academy, where a fresh crop of young individuals was honing their talents and learning what they needed to continue this ship's mission.

Alone again, he paused and stopped off at a small café and ordered a raktagino. He had developed a taste for it long ago as Curzon, and he had never shaken his love for the brew. He wondered what Curzon would think of his flying city, a world of its own, with its generational crew living out their lives serving a Federation that most of them had never actually seen.

Truth be told, that was the essence of their mission. The *J* had been out in the void for hundreds of years. Such was the level of technology involved in her creation that, as long as there was energy to be had, she could maintain herself almost indefinitely. After the defeat of the Sphere Builders in the twenty-sixth century, the ship had returned to her original mission: intergalactic exploration.

Gifted with warp, transwarp *and* quantum slipstream drives, the ship was capable of incredible speed. All the same, the spaces involved in intergalactic travel meant the ship would be in the void between galaxies for years at a time.

As he sipped his Klingon coffee, he smiled to himself. At least he would have a lot to report when he finally got home. Their mission to Andromeda had been illuminating, to say the very least.

Many years before, the crew of the *USS Enterprise NCC-1701* under James T Kirk encountered a scout group of aliens from there and, even though peaceful contact had been made, once they returned their people had never been heard from again. Curious, Starfleet had decided that ship's namesake would seek out the answer to that very question. He was looking forward to giving his report. He was certain they would be pleased with what he had to say.

After ten year's travel across the vast emptiness that is intergalactic space, word had filtered down from the upper decks that they were at last nearing the Great Barrier at the edge of the galaxy. Dax had no interest in penetrating it, he was going around it. Contrary to popular belief, the Great Barrier did not encircle the galaxy in a great, cosmic sphere; it was a band that sat out from the edge of the spinning top spiral that is the Milky Way. Considering the fact that Andromeda is to be found well above the plain of the galactic ecliptic, bypassing the dangerous energy field was not only preferable, it was a necessity.

Truth be told, Dax was aching to put his feet down on the soil of a real planet, not something manufactured by one of the holodecks. It looked real, and felt real, but inside every being on the ship was a little voice that reminded them: *it's not real*. There were times he envied the children aboard ship. Aside from their adventures on the holodecks, they didn't know what they were missing.

Dax missed Trill. He wondered how his homeworld was doing. Considering it was now over *half a millennia* since they had left, it was going to be good to be home. He missed the caves where he could immerse himself and, while floating free,

commune with his former hosts. It brought a smirk to his face that the room would have to be a big one. There had been so many faces of the being named Dax.

His communicator badge chirped. He sighed. No rest for the wicked, he thought. He tapped it in response. "Dax here."

"Captain," came the voice of his first officer, a female Cardassian named Tryna Sill. "We're nearing the last beacon point."

Dax sighed. He'd almost forgotten about that. On their way back to Earth, and the Milky Way galaxy, they had stopped every ten thousand lightyears to drop a subspace relay. Together, they formed a chain that would keep them in contact with the friends they had made in Andromeda. Each device was *big*, as it would have to broadcast over quite a distance. However, their power source was virtually unlimited, as their new friends in Andromeda had long ago solved the problems of creating a stable Omega power source. Indeed, the *Enterprise* wasn't powered by a matter/antimatter/dilithium core, but by harnessed, stable Omega molecules. They had even managed to manufacture their own, and thus a good portion of the ship had been given over to the construction of beacons – and Omega.

"Drop us out of slipstream when you're ready, Tryna," he said, a small grin spreading over his lips. "You know the drill."

He could almost hear her smile over the comms. "Aye, Captain. I'll let Sarah know."

Their name for the ship's AI was one the vessel's brain centre had given herself shortly after she became self-aware.

She had even insisted she was female, even though she did not have any anatomy to back the claim up with. "Thanks, Tryna. I'll see you shortly."

It had taken a day to set up the new relay and run its test diagnostics. They had sent the usual test message, however Dax was not willing to wait for a reply. He knew it would take about a month for it to be received. However, he was able to retrieve the previous test message that had been relayed to the last station they had put in place. It had become a routine for them, and a timesaver. However, it did require a fair amount of faith on their part. If the last one had failed, it would take a six-month round trip to fix whatever problem had arisen.

He wasn't overly concerned. Each relay had a small, AI computer of its own and a number of DOT drones to maintain itself with. The biggest concern they had was the remote possibility of being caught in an energy wave from a supernova. All the same, the relays had more than enough power to weather the storm, and he found the AIs never got bored. They each had their own, amiable personality and they had taken to talking among themselves.

All the same, it was a very long chain of relays that was keeping them in touch with Andromeda. He was concerned that, one day, something drastic would happen that could break that chain. He had discussed the issue with his senior staff, and they had come to the conclusion that, once they had returned to Starfleet, they could petition that a new drone ship be commissioned that would be tasked with that very job. Considering the vast spaces involved, perhaps a few of them.

Captain Dax stood on the bridge, which wasn't that much bigger than what he knew a Galaxy-class ship had once used, and gazed at the ship's forward viewer. It wasn't a screen, it was a three-dimensional space that could render the near just as easily as the far. He stepped forward and said: "Sarah, give me the space in the immediate vicinity."

"Yes, Captain," came the smooth, confident voice from above. Dax sometimes wondered if that calm voice would be better served as a counsellor, or at least she could moonlight as one.

The space before him quickly resolved to show him the huge saucer of the *J*, with its narrow, needle-like warp nacelles that stood out from their tapered, engineering hull. Nearby, perhaps only a kilometre away, was the newly installed and operational subspace relay.

His XO joined him at his side. Edan was of average height for a Trill male, however Tryna practically dwarfed him as the six-foot plus Cardassian female crossed her arms and checked out their handiwork. It was a little ritual they had performed many times before. A quick, final check that things were the way they should be before moving on. "All's well, Edan?" she asked with a smirk.

The Captain shrugged. "As far as I can see." He gave the vista one last look. "I think our work here is done." He drew in a breath, but halted when he realised they were not alone. Looking around Tryna, he saw the diminutive form of his chief communications specialist, Lieutenant Dana Troi, a native of Betazed, who was looking up at him sheepishly. "What can I do for you, Dana?" he asked amiably.

The Lieutenant seemed embarrassed. "Captain, I thought you should know. I've been scanning the subspace channels ever since we dropped out of slipstream, and I haven't heard much at all on the Starfleet frequencies. Certainly, nothing approaching what I would expect to hear considering our proximity to home."

Dax's eyes narrowed. "Have you heard anything at all?"

Troi shrugged. "Not much. I've picked up a few dispatches, but I haven't been able to decode them yet. They're using a new form of encryption that we've yet been able to quantify."

The Captain knew that *we* were Dana and Sarah. If the supercomputer couldn't figure it out, it had to be complex, he mused. "Did you send the message I asked?"

Dana was mildly offended by the question. "Of course, Captain. They should receive it about two weeks before we arrive."

Dax rocked on his heels, amused. "It's always a good idea to ring the doorbell before entering a house." He addressed the ceiling. "Sarah, could you please give me a view of the Alpha Quadrant?"

The image around them shifted and they saw the stars of home, gleaming brightly in the night. "Has much changed since we left?" he asked.

Sarah spoke again. "Not much that I can see so far, Captain."

Dax gave a tight-lipped smile. "Whatever it is, it can't be that bad, then." He gave Troi a cheering smile. "Perhaps they're not using subspace communications that much

anymore. Who knows what they're invented since we left?" Edan kept his voice upbeat and jovial, but inside he wasn't so certain. He caught Troi's eyes. "Just keep your ears open."

Dana gave a tight-lipped smile. "As much as I can considering we're deaf as a post in slipstream."

The Captain felt embarrassed. It had been so long since he had needed to contact *anyone* via subspace communicators, except when setting up their relays, that he had forgotten that little quirk. "Hmm. You're right, Dana. I should have known that. How about this. When we actually get to the galactic rim we'll drop into warp for a while and keep our ears open. If all things are then equal, we'll transwarp the rest of the distance to Earth. How does that sound?"

Troi nodded her agreement. "Aye, sir. It's a sound strategy." She gave a slight shudder. "I just have a bad feeling about this."

Dax shrugged. "I can't see the problem, really. Before we left, we'd managed to map the entire galaxy. Aside from the Dominion, which we made peace with ages ago, and the Caeliar, who keep to themselves, I don't know who might bother us. The Milky Way was pretty much one big happy family when we left."

Tryna interjected: "Aside from the Sphere Builders." She grimaced. "Perhaps they've been up to mischief again."

Dax considered that. The Sphere Builders were one tough nut to crack. Because they didn't even exist in their universe, it was not possible to remove them as a threat permanently. "All the same, before we left, Starfleet had developed strategies to keep them at bay. I'm confident they couldn't do the same again."

Commander Sill wasn't so certain. "I'm a Cardassian, Captain. We're born pessimists. If the Sphere Builders could do it here, they could do it again somewhere else."

"You're right about that, Tryna, I know. At least our friends in Andromeda have been forewarned." That was one thing he was confident of. He glanced up at the grey-skinned woman and changed the subject. "I know that you were born on *Enterprise*, and you've pretty much spent your whole life here, but is there anything you're looking forward to seeing when we get back?"

Tryna Sill shrugged. "My life has pretty much been spent in space, Captain. My home is the *Enterprise*. Aside from her, Andromeda was more of a home to me than Cardassia ever was. We were there for centuries." She tipped her head to the side and said: "You're one of the very few on this ship who actually *remembers* the Milky Way." She shrugged. "So, for me, I'd like to visit Cardassia, just to see what my ancestors thought was so great, then get back out here and, hopefully, we can do something worthwhile for the Federation."

Dax had to give her that point. The people on this ship, regardless of their family heritage, were more at home in Andromeda than they were in the Milky Way. There had been a number of people who had opted to remain there when the decision was made for the *J* to come home. They had filled the gaps in their crew with some of the natives of Andromeda who were just as much a part of the Federation family as humans, Andorians and Vulcans were. For the Andromedans, this was the journey of a lifetime, the chance to see a whole new galaxy. They had practically lined up for the chance to volunteer.

All the same, Dax wanted to go home. He was the one who had pushed for their return. The Federation's newest quarter was well and truly established, and it was time for their parent organisation to know they had a sibling. And, the truth be told, Dax just wanted to see the sky above Trill again. When the time came, he wanted to be home.

He sucked in a deep breath and decided they had procrastinated long enough. "It's time to get going. Sarah, set course for Earth along our previous alignment and engage slipstream."

"Executing," the computer replied.

As the ship vanished from that portion of space, Dax could not help but wonder what changes might have taken place since they left. Six hundred years was a long time.

The *USS Enterprise* dropped out of transwarp just outside the Sol system, on their guard as, since their arrival in the Milky Way Galaxy, they had yet to make contact with Starfleet. Dana and Sarah had scanned all of the usual frequencies, but there was little response. The problem as always, was distance. You still had to be within ten light years to speak with someone in real time over subspace. Even Memory Alpha wasn't responding.

With all those questions hanging, Dax thought the best solution was the obvious one, drop in and see who's home.

Once the ship cleared the orbit of Saturn the Captain ordered Yellow Alert. As he looked about him on the bridge, he almost found it odd to find it properly staffed. On their intergalactic voyage Sarah had taken care of most of the ship's flying and navigation. There was very little for the non-

synthetics to do. Now, the bridge was fully staffed with the usual officers manning the now activated stations. He wasn't worried about them being rusty. They had all been well schooled and occasionally drilled on their way home.

Sitting in the Centre Seat, with Tryna standing by his side, he watched the tri-D visuals and wondered. Surely someone would have said "hello" by now.

"Lieutenant Troi," he said, all business. "Please open hailing frequencies."

"Hailing frequencies open."

"Good morning. This is the starship *Enterprise* calling Starfleet Command at San Francisco – if it's still there. Requesting permission to enter the Sol System and dock at Starbase One." He kept his voice business-like, but inoffensive.

There was silence for a moment, then they received a reply. A three-dimensional image of an average looking, dark-skinned woman appeared before them in a dark blue uniform. The object on her chest, which should have had a Starfleet emblem on it, was unfamiliar to them. The first thing that Dax noticed about this woman was that she seemed annoyed.

"Oh, my God. Another one. Starfleet vessels seem to be falling out of the sky of late."

A number of bells went off in Dax's brain all at the same time. The way she spoke it was clear she was speaking of something *other*. She was not a part of Starfleet.

Dax decided on polite diplomacy. "Hello. I'm Captain Edan Dax of the starship *Enterprise* NCC-1701-J. We've just returned from Andromeda where we've been on an ... extended mission."

The woman shrugged. "I suppose I should be polite. I'm Captain Ndoye of the Earth's Defence Forces. Your arrival was unexpected and is not necessarily welcome. While our government is currently in talks with the Federation about the possibility of rejoining, we have yet to come to a decision and, frankly, your dropping in on us unannounced is not helping anything."

Dax realised later that he wasn't the only one who sucked in a stunned breath. What had happened here that *Earth* would leave the Federation? Never mind that, why would their presence be anything less than welcome? After all that they had been through, this reception was akin to a slap in the face. He took a moment to collect his thoughts, and reign in his feelings, then address the younger lady. "My apologies, Captain. We left the Milky Way in the twenty-sixth century on a mission to Andromeda. I would think you have a record of our leaving."

Ndoye glanced off to the side as if she was reading something. "Yes, *Enterprise*. We do have a record of your departure, but your ship was declared a loss three hundred years ago when you failed to return, or call home for that matter."

Dax summoned on all his lifetimes for the right amount of patience. This relatively young lady was being abrasive, perhaps to get on his nerves, perhaps because she was bossy and liked having her own way. Either way, he was not going to take the bait. "As you can imagine, Captain. Our travel time was quite long, our ability to call home was limited—although we did try—and our mission took on some surprising turns. If

our presence here is not welcome at this time, please, can you point us in the direction of Starfleet Command?"

Ndoye seemed apprehensive. She was not ready to take him at his word.

Dax pre-empted her. "I'm quite happy for you to scan our vessel. While we've had some upgrades along the way, I assure you that she is still, at heart, the *Enterprise-J* that left all those years ago." He glanced to the side. "Set condition Friendly."

Ndoye had no idea that Dax's order wasn't exactly what it sounded like. Yes, the *Enterprise* was now open to scans, but one hostile move would have the ship's formidable defences ready and able to hand out some severe punishment.

It came as no surprise when the ship was quickly surrounded by four of the most peculiar looking starships Dax had ever seen. The idea of disconnected warp nacelles was odd, to say the least. He noted they kept a respectable distance, and their weapons were not activated.

"We are being scanned," came the report from Science.

"Feel free to return the gesture," Dax said. "I'd like to know who lives here now."

"Fascinating," came Sarah's voice. "They're using programmable matter now." She sounded intrigued.

Dax sighed. This was interesting, but largely unproductive. His first duty was to report to *Starfleet*, not Earth's now clearly paranoid defence forces.

Ndoye finally nodded. "Your identity is confirmed, *Enterprise*. We're sending you the co-ordinates for Starfleet Command now, on a frequency you're familiar with." She gave them a brief smile. "Say hello to the *Discovery* for me."

Tryna gave her captain a curious look, which he replied to with a slight shrug. Neither of them had any idea what she was talking about. It had been a long time since the fleet had a ship with that name.

"Thank you for the assist, Captain. May the wind be in your back."

Ndoye disappeared from their screen and Dax had to wonder whatever happened to common courtesy.

"Do we have the co-ordinates?" Tryna asked.

Their pilot, Lieutenant Commander Borch, a proud Klingon warrior, acknowledged the request. "Yes, Commander. At transwarp we can be there in four hours."

Their XO glanced at their Captain and his smile was all she needed. "Set course for Starfleet Command and, once we're clear of the system, engage transwarp." She added quietly: "I'd like to see some friendly faces."

As predicted, four hours later the *Enterprise* dropped out of transwarp one AU from the co-ordinates given.

"Scan the area," Tryna ordered. She was not taking any chances.

Science reported. "There is an area of distortion not far from here. It looks like someone is trying to hide their presence."

Dax frowned. That wasn't the way Starfleet used to operate. Wherever they went they flew the flag proudly. This was something different. "Open hailing frequencies."

"Open."

"Starfleet Command, this is the *USS Enterprise* NCC-1701-J, Captain Edan Dax commanding. We are reporting for duty."

Their viewer changed to show a harried looking, middle aged human with a very welcome Starfleet emblem on his chest. "This is Admiral Vance, C-in-C, Starfleet. You're a bit late, don't you think?"

The annoyed, but at least present, attempt at breaking the ice, was appreciated. "Greetings, Admiral," Dax continued. "We have just returned from our mission and we're looking forward to seeing some friendly faces."

The Admiral nodded. "Your ship has been scanned and your identity confirmed. I must say, I should be surprised to see you, but having ships from the past suddenly showing up out of nowhere is becoming a bit routine around here." He nodded to someone off to the side. "Please have your pilot follow the course we're sending you and you will be given permission to enter. We'd normally bring you in on auto, but your computer seems to have some pretty solid firewalls. I look forward to the debriefing."

Dax's eyes went wide. It was likely to be quite a long one at that.

There were a number of things that brought a smile to Dax's face when their ship entered the large, well-lit space. For one, there were two ships whose names caught his eye. The latest starship *Voyager* reminded him of the time spent with Admiral Janeway so many years ago, and the starship *Nog* brought to mind a mental image of young Ensign Nog – the first

Ferengi in Starfleet – a man who sacrificed so much for the cause, especially during the Dominion War.

Curiously, he noted there was no starship *Discovery* here. He wondered if the Earth Defence captain had gotten the name right.

They also noted that the *Enterprise* was the biggest ship in the dock. It came as no real surprise to the crew, at the time of her building, the *J* and her sisters had been the biggest undertaking in Starfleet's history. It seems they might have created a record.

Dax and Sill were beamed into the C-in-C's offices and the debriefing began. One of the first questions asked was: "How did the *Enterprise* survive the Burn?"

The two officers shared a curious look. "The what?" they asked in unison.

Admiral Vance considered their reaction before adding: "About one hundred and twenty years ago an event took place that rendered dilithium within the galaxy to become inert, practically simultaneously."

The ramifications of this event was not lost on either *Enterprise* crewmembers.

"Boom," Tryna said, quietly.

"How many ships were lost?" Dax asked.

"Most of them," Vance stated. "All ships with an active warp drive exploded."

Captain and XO shared a look. That problem wasn't just limited to Starfleet. "Interstellar commerce must have stopped, practically overnight."

Vance nodded. "It did. We've had some successes recently as a new source of dilithium has been acquired and it is

being distributed as we speak. *Discovery's* arrival was fortuitous."

There was that ship name again. Dax made a mental note to enquire about it later. However, there were much more important issues to discuss. "Admiral, if the *Burn*, as you call it, affected more than the Milky Way, there is a way to test that. We can call our friends in Andromeda and see if it affected them."

Vance practically recoiled. The notion was alien to him. "Call *Andromeda*? How?"

Dax nodded to his X and Sill explained the string of subspace communications relays that formed a connection to that galaxy. "We could call them today, Admiral, and we'd have the answer for you in a couple of months. Even with the link, there is a sizeable delay."

Vance sucked in a breath, considering the amazing achievement. To be able to communicate with another *galaxy* was almost beyond his imagining. All the same, he wondered if *Discovery* could easily make the journey to that distant collection of stars. "That would be appreciated, Commander." He looked down at his fingers as he drummed them on the surface of the table. "Now, Captain Dax, could you please explain why the *Enterprise* has been gone for six hundred years?"

Edan sat back and stretched his arms and legs. He may as well get comfortable; they were going to be here for a while. "Admiral, our original mission was to seek out the aliens who visited us in the Twenty-Third, who James T Kirk encountered in his *Enterprise*, as they returned to their home, and we never heard from again. They were a formidable force then and we

were sent to gauge whether they still posed a threat to the Federation. Upon our arrival, we spent a number of years, cloaked, doing reconnaissance. In time, we discovered that Rojan and Kelinda, the leaders of the original scout force, were still alive and we approached them first as we thought they might be our best chance for opening a peaceful dialog. They welcomed us with open arms and brought us before their people's council. You'd be surprised at their natural form, Admiral. They're not quite corporeal, and they can change their physicality to suit their current objectives. While they are a peaceful people, they were not without threats from outside. Their original reason for coming here was to invade, as they considered us to be lesser forms of life. However, Jim did a great job of demonstrating that there were advantages to being completely corporeal and that life as a human, for instance, wasn't something to be frowned upon. It was simply a different way to exist."

Tryna interjected. "Once they got that idea settled in their minds, they were welcoming to the peoples of the Federation because we reflect values that they agree with. In time, we managed to convince them to become members of the Federation."

Vance's eyes widened. "Federation members?" he said, stunned. "In Andromeda?"

Dax chuckled. "Admiral, do you think we could order up some coffee? You're going to like this story."

That comment broke the ice for the Admiral, and he let out a long, relaxing breath. "Yes, Captain. I think you're right." He called for the computer and ordered up three coffees.

Within seconds, each of them had a mug of their favourite brew steaming in their hands. "Please continue."

Dax sipped his raktagino and smiled. Not bad. "Anyhow, the Kelvans, Rojan's people, had changed their ways since their experiences with Jim."

The Admiral held up a finger. "Computer, a brief bio of James T Kirk, please."

Sill caught her Captain's eye, surprised. Even though Kirk was three hundred years before the *Enterprise* left the galaxy, his name was easily remembered. Perhaps the name Kirk was beginning to become nothing more than another page in history. Within moments, the computer gave the Admiral a condensed version of his life, and Dax was pleased that it had gotten the details correct. The Admiral then nodded for Dax to continue.

"All the same, even though the Kelvans had chosen a different path, there were still plenty of other species in Andromeda who had long memories. You see, the Kelvans had either subjugated most of the other intelligent species there or kept them from expanding their dominions. There was a lot of bad blood."

"You can say that again," Sill added, her grey skin darkening. She had seen the holos.

Dax nodded. "As the Kelvans were now Federation members, we had a duty to not only defend our allies, but also to reach out the hand of friendship. It took centuries, but we finally brokered a peace between the Kelvans and their former enemies." He paused and took a sip of his cooling brew. "As you know, Admiral, it can take centuries for the sins of the past to be forgotten, or at least to be left in the past."

To Dax and Sill's surprise, a guest dropped in out of nowhere. This man wore a Starfleet uniform with the colours of medical. His head was mostly bald, except for a line of dark hair that formed a band above the ears. Without introduction, he added: "You can say that again."

The Admiral scowled. "Doctor, how many times have I asked you to stop doing that?"

Voyager's former EMH scoffed. "I'm a hologram, Admiral. There's very little point to me knocking."

Vance rolled his eyes. "You could, at the very least, announce yourself before simply appearing."

The Doctor gave him a look that simply stated: "Where would the fun be in that?" He addressed the *Enterprise* crew. "My experiences with the Kyrians taught me that blood feuds can run deep. It was centuries before their two cultures put their differences behind them. I only just recently found my way back here. It was a good thing their culture wasn't based on dilithium for energy production, otherwise I might have been lost during my, er, voyage."

The Admiral gave a sideways look that suggested he sometimes wished that would have been the case.

Dax sighed to break the tension. "The Doctor is right. It took some diplomacy, patience, and a lot of time, before all of the parties finally began playing nice with one another. Now, practically every race in Andromeda is now a member of the UFP."

Vance did a doubletake. "Seriously?"

"Absolutely, Admiral. They have their own Federation council, their own Starfleet, and they've managed to solve most of their energy problems. However, their original problem of

increasing radiation levels in Andromeda remains, and we still need to help them find a new home."

Vance blanched. "You're not serious?"

Sill sighed. She wasn't surprised by his reaction, not since she had learned how small the Federation had become. "We are, Admiral. Most of the Kelvan scouts that were sent out to the surrounding galaxies never returned. As far as we know, Rojan and Kelinda and their crew are the only ones to return."

The Doctor grimaced. "And they didn't exactly bring good news. There was not room for them here, at least not without us putting up one hell of a fight."

Dax gave a slight nod. "You're right, Doctor. We would have gone down swinging, but we probably would have gone down. You see, they had harnessed the power of Omega."

The Doctor did not understand the inference, as his memories of *Voyager* ended before they encountered the molecule. However, the Admiral flinched. "That is a classified subject, Captain. Doctor, please leave the room. You're not cleared for this."

The hologram pouted his offence but obeyed all the same.

"Captain," Vance said. "Explain yourself."

Dax wasn't surprised by the Admiral's reaction. He was well aware of the Omega Directive. "Admiral, the *Enterprise* is powered by Omega, not a matter/antimatter core. It has been for centuries. The Kelvans shared their knowledge with us and how they made it entirely stable. I can now share that with you."

Shock and awe warred for supremacy on the Admiral's face. He didn't know whether to be angry or elated. "Captain.... I will have to take this up with the council."

Dax shrugged. "I understand, Admiral. It's a lot to take in, a lot to consider. Just remember, any culture that has harnessed Omega no longer needs dilithium. At least, they're not dependent on it anymore."

The C-in-C pondered that point. The station was kept running by the combined outputs of all the ships present at the time. One Omega power plant could keep them going indefinitely, and without a ship present. It would free up their resources immeasurably. "All the same, Captain, I'm going to need you, your engineering team, and perhaps your science team, to brief us and the council. We need to know the problems of the past are well and truly behind us."

"Understood, Admiral. Although you don't need us all. You just need Sarah."

"Who?"

Tryna grinned toothily. It was nice to have someone to make a little trouble for. "Sarah is the *Enterprise*'s AI computer. She knows all of the pertinent details and could explain it a lot better than the rest of us. Admiral, with your permission?"

Bamboozled, the Admiral simply nodded. Tryna tapped her chest and called: "Sill to *Enterprise*. Sarah, could you tie yourself into this office's holo emitters and join us?"

The computer's melodic voice responded. "I thought you'd never ask."

In the blink of an eye, a young, female human being appeared. Dax knew this image to simply be Sarah's avatar, but the AI had quite an appreciation for beauty. She was gorgeous,

with more than a hint of Marilyn Munro in her looks. She had dressed in a uniform like Vance's. "Good morning, Admiral," she said cheerfully.

Vance could not help but be impressed. "Good morning, Sarah," he said politely. "Captain Dax tells me that you would be able to give our people a full briefing on Omega and how to keep it safe."

Sarah glanced at the Captain and he gave her a nod. "Yes, Admiral. I'd be happy to. I know that Omega could take care of most of the Federation's energy needs."

That was the understatement of the century, Dax thought. It might even help bring many of the former Federation worlds back into the fold.

The Admiral was beginning to wonder if the bubble on this batch of good news was likely to burst. He decided to accept what they were offering at face value. After all, their scans had shown the *Enterprise* to have a substantial energy reserve. In fact, he knew that the older ship could have taken the entire base if Dax had wanted to. "Thank you, Captain. Your mission to Andromeda may have been a long one, but it has certainly borne fruit. Congratulations."

He paused for a beat, and before Dax could speak, he continued. "As for the situation in Andromeda, I may have some new information that could be useful in your hunt for a new home for the ... Kelvans."

Dax was intrigued, but not about to push. Their briefing had given the Admiral a lot to think about. One step at a time. "Thank you, sir. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to give my people some shore leave. The *Enterprise* might be a big

ship, but there's only so long you want to be walking down the same corridors before it starts getting old."

Vance nodded his understanding. "Please, Captain. I would ask for a little patience yet. I would like a little time yet to consider the ramifications of your return before we welcome you back into the fold fully."

The Captain wasn't entirely surprised. Considering all that the Federation had endured in the last century, he thought it reasonable that they were a little reluctant to throw out the red carpet. "I understand, Admiral. I've given you a lot to think about. I know you'll eventually give my people the benefit of the doubt and we will be able to say "we're home" at last. Until then, Admiral, I should be getting back to my ship. Please, just call when you're ready to have Sarah brief you on Omega." He stood and offered the Admiral his hand in friendship.

The Admiral was a little surprised by Dax's confidence, but he reminded himself that this alpha-male Trill had probably been running the same ship for over half a millennium. He was used to calling the shots. Considering what they had to offer, he was willing to let that continue – for now. "I will, Captain. I look forward to our next meeting." He returned the shake warmly. He wanted to add: "Welcome home," but he wasn't quite ready yet.

Back on board the *Enterprise* bridge, Dax stood with his best friend, Tryna Sill, and took a deep breath. "Troi, patch me in shipwide, please."

"Aye."

"This is Captain Edan Dax, can I please have everyone's attention." He paused for a second, as he knew the people on

his ship needed a moment. "We've come a long way to bring our lady home. Things have not gone very well for the Milky Way in our absence, and the Federation has taken some hits. Some of our homeworlds are not necessarily still a part of it. However, the energy drain that has so badly affected our ancestral home doesn't need to continue. We've brought them the answer with Omega and, with time, I believe we can restore the Federation to greatness. Things were already improving when we arrived and, with our help, we can really get the momentum going. That's our job. History will never forget the name: *Enterprise*. Why? Because we're the history shapers."