

Ad Astra

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Ad Astra

by [mistral](#)

Summary

The fate of the Federation

Rear Admiral Chard Arch sat on a bench on the grounds of Starfleet Academy facing the statue of The Captain. He was waiting to meet someone, a very mysterious someone who had managed to infiltrate the security protocols of his personal 'corder and leave a message. When the message had popped up, Lexi, his 'corder, had been unable to ascertain where it had been sent from. This alone would have intrigued him enough to make the rendezvous but the message itself had terrified him. He'd boarded the next ship leaving Bajor for the transwarp conduit to Earth. He knew when he returned to the Federation capital he'd have to deal with the myriad twists and turns of political infighting that had occurred during his absence. At the moment the grand game of self-aggrandizement and assassination that constantly filled the Presidential Palace seemed petty and pointless. The message had said, "The Federation will cease to exist as a coherent political entity in three years. If you wish to know more, meet me at the statue of The Captain at noon in two days." So here he sat, waiting.

There had been no question of which statue the message referred to. Since time out of mind the cadets of Starfleet had rubbed the base of The Captain for luck before setting out on their first deep space assignment. The duranium plaque his eyes now rested on had been smoothed by the hands of countless generations until the very words, carved thousands of years before by some unknown artist, had nearly been worn away. Only a portion of the lettering could still be made out: "Ja rk" and beneath it: "b.22 d.2" and then a portion of a motto: "tal ship star her by". Chard had rubbed this self-same plaque one hundred thirty-two years previously when he'd left on his own graduation cruise to the Gamma Quadrant. Idly, he wondered what the defiant-looking young captain had done to warrant a statue here in Boothby's Garden right in the heart of Starfleet Academy. He'd researched it during his time in the academy but he'd run into data logs so old they showed evidence of having been corrupted during the near-mythical Holorevolt. Whomever he'd been, the image of him standing there, hands on his hips, staring up at the sky always produced a proud shiver down Chard's back. This was the spirit that Starfleet had been founded on, the mighty explorers of the past that had opened up the galaxy. Not the heavy-handed security force it operated as all too much these days. He sighed.

"Lexi," he sub-vocalized, "Any sign of anomalous persons in our immediate area?" There was a pause and then his 'corder replied.

"All beings within 600 meters exhibit proper subcutaneous Starfleet ids. Threat assessment is Green."

"Thank you, Lexi." Chard continued to look up at the face of The Captain, relaxing in the bright spring sunshine. He was startled out of his reverie a few moments later by the presence of another on the bench. "Lexi, id individual one meter right of me!" he sub-vocalized urgently. His hand slipped down towards the knife on his hip.

"There are no individuals within 25 meters of your location at this time," his 'corder replied. Chard turned towards the man, his eyes wide. His hand whipped the dagger out of its sheath, almost of its own accord. "Who are you? How did you sneak up on me?"

The other man, a Human, smiled. "You won't need that knife," he said. "I'm not here to hurt you and there is no way you can harm me with that." Still smiling, his hand moved in a blur, plucking the blade from Chard's hand and returning it to its sheath. Chard gaped at him. "Besides," the man said, "I didn't ask you here to assassinate you. We need to talk."

Collecting himself, Chard examined the man seated on the bench beside him. He was wearing a long coat with wide lapels over some kind of vest and shirt arrangement. There was a peculiar cravat or scarf tucked under his shirt collar and into his vest. Black, loose-fitting pants extended down to a pair of black shoes made from some kind of animal hide, smoothed and shined to a high gloss. The ensemble was completed with a short-brimmed hat that had obviously seen better days. His hair was black, with a touch of grey in the front. He looked middle-aged, perhaps a hundred years old or so. He seemed to be pure-blooded Human, not that unusual here on Earth although hard to find out amongst the stars. Chard had often felt isolated amongst the many mixed races on Bajor, being of pure stock himself. The man kept up his slightly amused expression as he waited for Chard to get his thoughts together.

"You are the one who sent me the message?" Chard asked.

"Indeed, Admiral. As I said, we need to talk. The future of the Federation and, indeed, the Quadrants themselves is at stake." The man's smile never wavered at this pronouncement.

"How did you get that message into my 'corder? I was unable to trace the source. It is my understanding that such a thing just isn't possible.

You should have tripped a half-dozen alarms just trying to do it.” Chard eyed him suspiciously.

“Admiral Chard, let us say that your technology is based on earlier technology, and that upon even earlier technology. Anyone who is familiar with the underlying architecture can manipulate any system the Federation has. You see, today there are technicians to repair your devices to some extent but the technology, at least the computer-based technology, is manufactured on worlds like Rigel and Ferenginar by automatic machinery. Most of it is in module form so when a piece breaks down you merely swap in a new unit, correct?” Chard nodded. “Well,” the man continued, “You and I both know there probably isn’t a person left in this galaxy that could build a transtator circuit from scratch. There are very few who even know what that is. There are no true Engineers anymore, just repairmen. However, the transtator is the heart of nearly all Federation technology and has been for thousands of years. If one knew how to manipulate the basic programming of a transtator one could get any piece of technology to do as one wished. I point this out both to answer your question and to give you an idea of the resources I command.” The man continued to smile.

Chard took a few moments to digest this information. “So you are saying you could... manipulate any kind of Federation technology to do what you wanted it to?”

“That is correct.” the man agreed.

“And is that why your message claimed the Federation would fall within three years? Because you are going to corrupt our machines and render society helpless? Is this some kind of extortion scheme? If it is, you are talking to the wrong person. I’m just a Rear Admiral, not even a full one, certainly not a Star Admiral and with all of the toes I’ve stepped on over the years I have very little actual power or authority. If its blackmail you’re trying you should bring this to the President’s attention, not mine.” Chard was alarmed but annoyance and a touch of bitterness had crept into his voice.

The man looked startled for a second and then cut loose with peals of laughter. A few passing cadets glanced over and then moved on about their business.

“My dear Admiral, I don’t want to hold the Federation hostage to its own technology. In fact, I’m trying to save it and I need your help. “

“My help? I’m sorry, Mr. ...?” Chard trailed off expectantly. The man looked off at The Captain’s statue for a moment, a distant look in his eyes.

“Call me Dix, Admiral.” he said. Chard nodded.

“OK, Dix, why do you need my help?” he asked.

“Let me ask you a question, Admiral. Have you ever read the Federation Charter?”

“I attended the Academy. All cadets are required to read it.” There was a note of impatience in Chard’s voice. Dix nodded.

“And that’s as it should be,” he said, “But have you actually studied it? You know, in most schools across the Federation these days the students are only required to know the Opening Preface and few take the time to read the whole thing, little less study it in detail.”

“Look, I passed the quiz on it in Ancient History my plebe year, so what?” Chard was definitely becoming irritated. Dix just smiled again.

“Admiral, there is a particular section of the Charter that allows for the existence of an organization who’s sole directive is to maintain the integrity of the Federation. For many years after the founding of the Federation this organization worked clandestinely to prevent the corruption or destruction of the Federation as a whole by outside influences. After several centuries the people who worked in this organization, named Section 31 after the relevant portions of the Charter, became so distorted in their beliefs that they tended to trample the very principles they were sworn to uphold. Arrogance became their calling card and they caused no end of troubles, destroying lives indiscriminately to further their plans. Eventually they overstepped their bounds, assassinating a President who’s agenda varied widely from their own. Their own hubris became their downfall.

After their presence became known to Starfleet they were eventually hunted down and destroyed. Section 31 hasn’t existed for over three thousand years and is largely forgotten. However, before they were wiped out one of their number, a man named Jared, managed to recruit a new agent. Jared was not like many of the other members of Section 31. He took the words of the Charter to heart long after the others had forgotten them. To this new agent, in the final days before the Section was eradicated, he entrusted all of their records and secrets. The agent was able to survive the purge and preserve the records, remaining in hiding as the rest died. Section 31’s mandate has continued to this day. Working behind the scenes, using information hidden or long forgotten, and always staying true to the founding ideals of the Federation, Section 31 has preserved the Federation against all threats that Starfleet could not deal with. Now a threat exists that will break the Federation apart and Section 31 needs your help.” Dix leaned back a bit, hands wrapped around one knee, watching him.

Chard sat thoughtfully for a few moments. “This Section 31 needs my help so they sent you to recruit me?”

Dix grinned. “Not exactly. You see, that agent Jared recruited? That was me. I am Section 31.” Chard’s puzzled reaction only made Dix smile broader.

“But you said Section 31 was destroyed over three thousand years ago. Are you telling me you’ve been alive the whole time?” Chard snorted. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Admiral,” Dix asked, “Have you ever toured the Starfleet Museum here on the Academy grounds?” When Chard nodded Dix continued, “And have you seen the Early Federation display in the Hall of Origins?” When Chard nodded again Dix stood up. “Perhaps we should take another tour of the exhibits.” He turned and began walking towards the Museum Complex. Chard shrugged and followed him. As they walked Dix said nothing and Chard was deep in his own thoughts, considering what Dix had told him.

After about fifteen minutes, as the looming complex of buildings grew in front of them, Chard sub-vocalized, “Lexi, research any information on Section 31 in Federation historical records.” They had reached the perimeter of the Museum Complex before his ‘corder returned any information.

“Fragmentary references to Section 31 found in partially corrupted medical log dated stardate 92374.1. Corrupted file from Federation Council minutes referencing Section 31, stardate 1236657.4. No other entries found.”

“Play medical file, please.” “Working,” the ‘corder came back. A holo image of a 2-d recording played on Chard’s retina implants, visible only to him.

“...ian Bashir, stardate 92374.1. With Sloan dead it is my hope that I am free of Section 31 at last. What Chief...” The recording halted.

“Is that all there is, Lexi?” “Confirmed. The file is three thousand, three hundred and eight years old. 99% possibility of corruption during the Holorevolt.”

“OK,” Chard said, “Play second file.” Dix glanced at him in amusement as they walked and he realized he’d spoken out loud. He shrugged and concentrated on the new file.

This time the record was in 3-d, opening with a view of the hallowed Federation Council Hall as it had looked before the destruction of Paris during the Changeling Wars. Chard recognized it from history holos he’d seen.

“...cannot believe Section 31 has been operating since the Federation’s inception!” The speaker was an Old Klingon, probably in his middle years. “That such a thing exists here is astounding. These arrogant p’tahks have killed President Venar and they should be eradicated! I call a vo...” The record degraded into static.

Before Chard could ask, Lexi spoke up. “File complete. The file is three thousand one hundred and seventy-six years old. 99% possibility of corruption during the Holorevolt.”

They had arrived at the entrance to the Hall of Origins. Dix stopped and turned to Chard.

“Admiral, before we proceed I would like to say something. I chose you because, based on your record, you hold the true ideals of the Federation close to your heart. You have never ordered the assassination of anyone to further your career. You have found diplomatic solutions to crisis where others would have resorted to the application of force. You are loyal to the Federation rather than being a follower of the one who holds the Presidency. You have noted in several reports to the Admiralty that the current capabilities of the Fleet are not what they were in centuries gone by. More importantly, you have questioned why this is instead of resigning yourself to the facts. All of these things factor in to my decision to take you into my confidence. What you are about to learn is one of the three or four biggest secrets in the history of the Federation.” Dix clasped Chard’s shoulder and Chard was mildly surprised to note that his personal shield failed to activate. “Come, Admiral, a secret awaits.” Dix turned back to the Hall entrance and began briskly mounting the steps. Chard followed with a vague feeling of both trepidation and anticipation.

As they walked through the Hall, Dix leading the way, Chard noted that many of the displays were dusty with neglect. The farther back they walked the more noticeable this became, until finally, hundreds of meters deep into the Hall, the display cases themselves were so grimed with age that their contents were obscured. Here the only identifiable items were the big ones, the shuttles of ancient design and the various statues on pedestals. The lighting was poorly repaired this far back into the Hall and most of the descriptive plaques were hard to read. Dix walked with a sureness Chard found interesting. The man had obviously been to this part of the Hall before. Nearing the far end, Dix paused by the entrance to a side chamber, above which bore the legend ‘Hall of Captains’. Chard peered in and saw a large room filled with life-sized statues, their features invisible in the dim light. Representations of past Starfleet commanders held to their vigil as Dix seemed to give a nod towards the sculptures. He then resumed walking past the entranceway even farther into the dark recesses of the Hall. Finally, he stopped before a man-sized case that held a carpet of dust across its exterior. He removed a cloth from his jacket pocket and wiped at the small plaque fastened to the case. Pointing at it afterwards, he said, “Read that, Admiral.”

Chard glanced at Dix and bent over to read the newly cleaned off words.

“Commander Data of the Starship U.S.S. Enterprise. Killed in action...” here the stardate was still obscured, “Cmdr. Data was the only autonomous android to be given commissioned rank in Starfleet. Adjudicated a Man under the law, he gave his life to save his fellow officers and crew during the Reman revolt on...” The remainder of the plaque was still coated in grime. Chard shook his head slowly in wonder.

“I remember hearing the stories of the android who wanted to be a man at my mother’s knee. I never realized they were based in fact.” As he spoke Dix was wiping the grime off of the case itself. Then he pulled a pocket flash out and shone it up at his handiwork. Chard looked through the dirt into the case and saw an albino-looking humanoid figure dressed in an ancient gold and black uniform. The eyes were open and a small panel on the left side of the skull had been exposed to show the circuitry underneath.

“If you are familiar with the legend of Data then you must know the story of his evil twin brother, Lore.” When Chard nodded Dix continued, “That is Lore. His circuits were burned out long ago so he poses no threat but there stands the origin of every evil android story ever told.”

“How would you know that?” Chard asked.

Dix smiled in the dim light and turned his flash back towards himself. As Chard looked on in horror the color slowly leached from his skin. Dix’s eyes, a clear pale blue, slowly changed as well. They drained of all color so that the irises disappeared and then began to fill with a gold the shade of the Sun. When the transformation finished a duplicate of the android in the display case stood before Chard. The inhuman appearance of the figure in front of him was broken only by the warm smile on its face. Chard could feel perspiration on his hands as his breath came in short gasps.

“Admiral Chard Arch, allow me to introduce myself. I am Cmdr. Data, the last surviving agent of Section 31. For the past three thousand years I have been working against the forces of entropy to defend the Federation.” The android held out his hand.

“You’re a Changeling!” Chard blurted out. He looked around wildly for help but realized this area of the Hall had probably been deserted for years.

His hand still extended, Data said, “No, I killed the last one of those over twelve hundred years ago. My ability to change my appearance is only skin deep. It’s basically a matter of manipulating the electrical charges directly beneath my dermal surface. I assure you, Admiral, I do not bite.” Slowly, fearfully Chard took his hand. It was warm to the touch. “Admiral, your respiration is elevated and your mean body temperature

has risen .5 degrees. Would you like to sit down?" Looking somewhat dazed, Chard nodded silently. Data led him across the hall to a bridge mock-up and sat him down in the helmsman's seat. Then he took a small, clear flask from his jacket and held it out to Chard. Inside a blue liquid gurgled. "Care for a drink? You look as though you could use one." Numbly, Chard took the proffered bottle and tipped it back, swallowing a large mouthful. The fierceness of the liquor made him cough as he handed it back.

"What is that stuff?" he asked.

"Andorian brandy," Data replied, capping the flask and returning it to his pocket.

Chard looked puzzled. "How is that possible? The Andorians were wiped out by a genetic re-sequencing weapon over fifteen hundred years ago. Their planet was irradiated as well. Where did you get it?" Data just grinned.

"Feeling better?" "Yes." "Then perhaps we could continue our talk?" As he spoke Data's appearance returned to that of "Dix". Chard watched with his mouth hanging open, then abruptly gathered his dignity.

"Alright, Cmdr. Data, I think some explanations are in order. When you say you have been 'fighting the forces of entropy' for the last few... millennia what did you mean by that? And what do you want with me? Your message said the Federation has only three years left. What can I do to save it?" Chard swiveled to face him as Data sat in the "captain's" chair on the fake bridge.

"Admiral, when Agent Jared gave me all of Section 31's records he literally down-loaded them into me so they couldn't be traced. I allowed this because he had made his recruitment pitch to me quite convincingly. You see, as an organization or political entity ages it tends to succumb to entropy. That which was once vital becomes placid, that which was once placid begins to ossify, that which has ossified begins to rot. This comes about as the spirit of the past is lost to the present. I, however, am practically immortal. As an android I continue where others die. I cannot forget. In me there is continuity. I have done my best to stave off the rot, Admiral, over the passage of centuries. As the Quadrants were fully explored and the majority of the major powers encountered were absorbed into the Federation a lack of vitality became apparent. There was nothing new to capture the hearts and minds of society. Educational levels began to decline. Remember when I spoke about the transtators? The ships built today are as nothing to the ones Starfleet had in its primacy. Most of what you fly today is based entirely on old design schematics and as the data corrupts with age the designs are lost. So the next generation of ships is inferior to the last. Engineers today design nothing new. They merely tell the computers what they want and the computers dig into the files until they find design schematics that will fulfill their orders. This is only touching upon the overall problem, you understand. Our society had filled its available frontiers long ago and turned inward. You may find this hard to believe, Admiral, but for a very long time indeed assassination was NOT a means of advancement. In fact, it was against the law."

"Technically it still is," replied Chard.

"Technically, yes, but if so then why do you wear a personal shield? You begin to see my point. Once all life was held sacred by the Federation and its citizens. Now it is considered acceptable to kill off a superior who makes a mistake in order to take his place. That was once the way of the Klingons and the Romulans, and where are their empires today? Lost in the dustbins of history, absorbed by a Federation that believed ALL life was precious. It is not just the assassinations, Admiral. The schools all teach by rote instead of teaching how to learn. Starfleet roams the galaxy crushing dissent wherever it finds it. The President is treated more like an Emperor than an elected official. The last President that was fairly elected held office over four hundred years ago! Since then the Council "suggests" a candidate and that person wins the election in a rigged landslide. Democracy is dead, the people are no longer heard and the Federation will break up under its own strain in the next few years. Already, there have been armed revolts that have nearly succeeded. It won't be long before one does and from there it's a slippery slope leading to either Empire or a complete dark age. My own projections show a mix of both. The core of the Federation here in the Alpha Quadrant will probably hang on to the trappings of Federation for several centuries to come but eventually all will be lost. I've fought it for centuries any way I could but it is too far advanced to stave off much longer. That's where you come in."

Chard had been transfixed by Data's monologue and was quite startled at its abrupt end.

"How can you be sure of this? I am not as positive as you about these signs of corruption. Could what you describe not be signs of cultural change instead?"

Data shook his head. "Admiral, the corruption of society is too far-reaching. Why, look at your own name as an example of its pervasive influence."

"My own name?" Chard's brows furrowed. "Whatever do you mean?"

Data chuckled. "Do you even know your family history? I do. Its in the files I've maintained all of these years. Chard is a corruption of the old Human name 'Richard' and your last name, Arch, originally started as 'Archer'. In fact, you are a descendant of one of the founders of the Federation. In that room over there," he nodded towards the Hall of Captains, "Is a statue honoring his accomplishments. My point is that the society we live in is falling apart. The Federation ideals your ancestor helped create are distorted beyond recognition."

"And you expect me to help save it?" Chard asked, "How? What can I do?" He shook his head. "I told you, I am a lowly officer in the Admiralty. I command neither fleets nor armies. What can I do?"

Data smiled again. "You will soon be offered the position of Head of Starfleet Academy. As I said, I work behind the scenes. When you take the position you will do as your superiors ask but you will really be working for me. What I need you to do is to set up a 'school within a school', taking only the best and the brightest. Teach them the lost history I have stored within me, make them believe in the Charter with all of their hearts and kindle a flame of exploration that engulfs them."

Chard looked somewhat askance at this statement. "To what end?"

"To save the Federation. To save all that is or was good about it. To save its heirlooms, its documents, its very history and knowledge from the barbarians that will be coming." Data's eyes gleamed in the dim lighting and Chard silently wondered if he was completely sane.

“How am I to do this?” he asked.

“Admiral, when you take over the school you will find those with potential and nurture them. I will help. You will appoint me as a Professor and I will be there to help you guide and build up a core of reliable people in Starfleet. It will take several decades to build a large enough base but when we are done we will take the next step.”

Chard looked hard at Data. “What do you have in mind, revolution? I will not take arms against the Federation. I swore an oath and I will stand by it. I may be willing to help you but not if it comes down to that.”

“No, my dear Admiral, I would not ask that of you. The Federation as I have known it is dying and nearly dead. The only option is to start over somewhere else.” Data waited to see how Chard would react.

Chard stared off into space for a few moments. “Data,” he responded, “You said yourself that we have filled our frontiers. Where are we to go to re-create...” he stopped speaking and a horrified look took over his face. “No, you can’t be serious! You want to cross the Great Dark! That’s impossible! No one has ever survived it!”

“Chard, you forget, I have the old histories stored within me. I have three separate Starfleet reports detailing passage between the galaxies. We can do this, and do it safely. I know because I was onboard one of the ships that actually did it. It was later generations passing down half-garbled stories that perpetuated the myth of the Great Dark. I can manipulate things well enough to get the necessary ships built. I need you to help me crew them with the right kind of people. We can do this! Are you with me?” Again Chard wondered if the android was completely sane.

“Show me this statue of my ancestor, Data.” Data nodded slowly and led him to the Hall of Captains. Admiral Arch examined them, these images of long-dead explorers as Data told him of their many victories and defeats. He brought them to life for Chard and with them, an era lost. It was far past dark when they finally left the Hall.

Forty-two years later
May 5th, 5137 A.D.

On this day in Federation history: the Hirogen revolt smashed the last major Starfleet forces in the Delta Quadrant at the Battle of Talax. In response to the loss, President Danuk of Quon’os stepped down for “health” reasons. He was succeeded by President Marcos of Alpha Centauri who was elected with a 98% majority of the vote.

An unknown disease swept Tellar, killing 7 out of 10 planet-wide. Although they broadcast a planetary distress signal Starfleet failed to respond until the plague had run its course.

A transporter accident on Ferenginar completely devastated the autonomic factory complex at Greela, destroying 58% of the Federation’s production capability of transtator modules.

A terrorist bomb exploded in the Starfleet Museum Complex on Earth, destroying the Hall of Origins and countless historic items and documents, including the last know hand-signed copy of the Articles of Federation.

Over 10,000 officers failed to report to their posts in the Alpha, Beta, and Gamma Quadrants, throwing Starfleet logistics into chaos. They were never seen again.

Somewhere near the edge of the Milky Way, beyond the farthest Federation outpost, a small fleet of ships paused just this side of the Great Barrier... and jumped to warp.

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