

Listen up, Traks fans! Paramount owns and operates the official Star Trek franchise, as well as several modest alternate realities. Star Traks was dreamt by Decker, who has since been writing to rid himself of the nightmare. Drawn into the Traks realm was Meneks, writer of BorgSpace. Visitors to the Traks zoo are discouraged from feeding the authors, by order of The Management.

The Dark were originally mentioned in the three-part, Season 2 story, "Let Sleeping Borg Lie." Other than that, the events herein are completely original (more or less). The use of the future version Secondprize and crew have been given the big thumb's up of approval by Decker.

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## **Dark Rising**

### **Epilogue**

In a place where time and space is meaningless, more or less...

Captain rolled his head back and forth as a finger snapping noise echoed next to his ears. Subsequent pinching of both his cheeks caused him to grimace, but still he refused to open his eyes. "Just a few minutes longer," he said, aware of the heavy effort it took to utter the whisper. Snapping and pinching stopped, followed by the low murmur of consultation. Captain ignored the muted voices, allowing himself to return to the comfortable depths in which he had been floating.

A deluge of very cold water poured over Captain's head, shocking him into full, startled consciousness. Several small chunks of ice bounced off head and nose as he stared into the annoyed face of a blue alien holding a bucket and wearing what appeared to be a maid's outfit and a brightly feathered bowler hat. Disconcertingly, the alien had a large hole burned through her torso where vital organs such as heart and lungs were usually located on bipeds. The lack did not seem to bother the alien, who snorted, then turned to shout something about the final one being awake. Before Captain could stitch his mind together into a semblance of awareness, the alien sauntered away, a nasty smirk plastered on her face.

"Welcome back to the land of the living, I think," said a familiar voice to Captain's right. "We are number 1,111,470. They called number 1,111,468 a little while ago, so we should be up pretty soon. Here, you can hold the paper." Second handed over a long strip of cheap paper with the aforementioned number printed on it in bright red ink. Captain automatically grasped it, his attention caught by other sights. The situation was quite surreal.

The room was large, seemingly infinite in proportion, yet still of limited dimensions. On the one hand, while Captain could easily see the wall across from the (wet) seat in which he was propped, at the same time he could make no judgment as to distance. To his right stretched a long line of chairs, each occupied by a drone; the line stretched to the apparent horizon, yet an inherent knowledge knew that all the members of Cube #347 were accounted. Even the act of sitting was natural, although by all rights it should be uncomfortable and awkward at best, and in the case of Sensors, only ten chairs distant, impossible. Captain thought about standing up, but immediately dismissed the notion.

Again Captain gazed down the length of chairs where the entirety of Cube #347 resided. Some stared at the opposite wall, while others absently read and reread framed poster advertisements which sported not-quite-cheerful sayings such as "Death! The Hereafter Wants

You!" and "The Best Years of Your Afterlife, Invest in Funeral Bonds and Dead Pools - Lynch, Investing Services." Other drones were deeply engrossed in ancient magazines (Headline on Q-Times: "Was the Big Bang Worth It?") or quietly inspecting a prosthetic for the umpteenth time. If Captain concentrated, he could hear the buzz of self-absorbed minds concentrating on various minor tasks, but not the standard give and take of the Collective link, nor the ever-present murmuring of the Greater Consciousness. Somehow, Captain felt this state of affairs should be mildly disturbing at the least, and panic inducing at the worst, but his mind felt heavy, as if sleep had not been lifted for part of his thinking self, the part which usually worried about things such as being severed from the Collective.

The drones were not the only ones in the impossible room. Sitting in chairs, often holding their own lengths of paper inscribed with a number, were a variety of sentients. Some were recognizable, such as the human rudely picking her teeth or the Klingon attempting to play a virtual xylophone using his brow ridges and a broken pencil. A species #8472 looked up from its magazine, contemplated Captain with a look of sheer boredom, blinked its eyes, then returned to reading. Other beings were not known, like the thing which resembled a giant orange mushroom, the trio of knee-high stick insects perched on a single chair and jabbering animatedly among themselves, or the purple furred canine creature floating half a meter above its chair in a half-lotus position of deep meditation. One thing which linked all the people in the room, besides the omnipresent attitude of bored waiting, was the fact most sported fresh wounds, wounds which were ignored despite their serious and fatal nature. Captain performed a quick personal survey, finally discovering an innocuous charred spot on his upper right arm which indicated he had been the recipient of a lethal dose of electricity.

"By the Twins, what is going on here?" asked Captain loudly, turning in his chair to regard Second. He winced as he noted his second-in-command had a rather large piece of shrapnel embedded at an angle between shoulder and neck.

Second focused on Captain, shaking out of a trance of ceiling contemplation. "Hmm?" he hummed. "This location appears to be a waiting room." He pointed at the front of the room at a large reception window Captain had not previously noticed, inside of which was a human male wearing a charred Federation uniform with nurse insignia and radiating an attitude of "I'm busy. If you bother me while I'm filling out this important paperwork, you'll go to the back of the line." Over the window was a sign which read "Traumatic Injury Ward Waiting Room."

"Oh," said Captain.

The blue maid (nurse?) with hole in her chest appeared in the curtained doorway next to the window. "Patient number 1,111,469 - your case worker is ready." The Klingon pocketed his pencil and stood. As he made his way forward to the impatiently waiting alien, one could see the very large bat'leth slice creasing the back of his skull.

Captain sighed, glanced once more at the slip of paper in his hand, then proceeded to stare at the opposite wall for a short eternity.

"I said," shouted a voice a short (long?) time later, "Patient number 1,111,470. This is your last call. If you don't come now, you'll be sent to the back of the queue."

Second elbowed Captain in the rib area. "That is us."

Captain jumped up, waving the number. "We have it!"

The blue maid-nurse frowned displeasure. "Well, I don't have all eternity. Come along, then. Your Director is awaiting you." She motioned for Captain to come. As he began to do so, the rest of the cube membership stood, quietly forming into a line to follow.

Captain led the long line through the door, following on the heels of the maid-nurse with

the feathered hat. Beyond the door was not the busy office scene as seen through the reception window, but rather a hallway disappearing to the vanishing point, closed doorways regularly spaced on each side. The floor was covered in a carpet of neutral beige, and the walls painted cream except for a stripe of light blue near the ground. A sourceless light cast a soft fluorescent glow. No one else was present, although in the far distance one could imagine a whisper of movement, a glimpse which refused come into focus.

After a short eternity following the guide, Captain managed to find the initiative to ask, "Where are we going?"

The blue-skinned woman looked over her shoulder, an expression of exasperation on her face. "Room 351,901, as if it is any concern to you."

Captain glanced to his right - 1,703. Behind arose Second's dejected sigh.

Another short eternity passed, and Captain noticed a door on his left to be slightly ajar. A bright yellow light, sunlight, leaked from the crack. Pausing, Captain cautiously nudged the door open to see into the room, ignoring the sound of a twenty-eight drone pileup as those to the front of the line tried to compensate for his sudden actions. The guide blithely continued on, unaware her four thousand charges were left behind.

Captain peered into the room, rewarded with the sight of another room as the main waiting area, both infinite and limited in aspect. A large wooden desk dominated the center of the room, behind which rose a green vine, two meters in length, vaguely snakelike in form excepting it had no eyes. Small leaves lay like scales upon the arm-thick plant, and it waved back and forth in a decidedly non-vegetative manner. A slit of a mouth gaped partway open, revealing the sheen of ragged quartz teeth. On the opposite side of the desk, the being with which the unusual plant appeared to be in deep conversation with (long moments of silence broken by short seconds of rasping) was...Thorny, Cube #347's own vegetative menace. Somehow all of its gray, silver, and green bulk was squeezed into the room, with space to spare. Some of its leaves were shredded, but otherwise it looked as it always did. It occasionally gestured a vine or rustled leaves in response to an unheard question. Neither plants overtly responded to the intrusion.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?" huffed the angry voice of the guide. Captain turned away from the room to face the glare of the maid-nurse. Meanwhile, the door quietly closed, propelled shut by a mottled gray and green vine. "This is room 56,393, and Mr. Spike is quite busy at the moment."

Captain tried to respond, "But...but that was..."

"Thorny, yes, I know. It came in with your lot, but since it went to the Vegetative Ward, it was seen considerably sooner than your group. Now come along, and no more side trips. Your case worker is waiting for you."

Plodding down the hallway, door after door passed, numbers slowly becoming larger. There was no sense of time, or more accurately, time was not important, was merely hanging around to make sure cause and effect were ordered correctly. Finally the blue guide stopped in front of a featureless door, the brass plaque reading 351,901. "Well, go on in, already. At this rate, the universe will soon be suffering heat death, good for nothing except 'brane fodder to crash into another universe and start a new big bang."

Captain regarded the blue being a long moment before opening the door. One after another the members of Cube #347 filed into the room, which was yet another example of space forgetting to follow the rules which applied to the rest of the universe. At the middle of the undecorated room was a large desk, similar in appearance to that seen earlier, with no one sitting behind it. Suddenly, between one celestial tick and the next, the desk was occupied by a large

eyeball with green iris. A shiny gold nameplate was centered on the front of the desk - "Maria Branson - Director."

The name, the eyeball, both were familiar. Very familiar. Exceedingly familiar.

Captain rallied himself, put aside the apathy which was draped over his psyche like a thick blanket. Behind and beside, he could feel four thousand minds slowly waking, the mental tempo beginning to increase. "You," accused Captain, "you are the reason? What is this place?" He waved his nonprosthetic hand to indicate the room, the situation.

The eyeball sighed, a long affair made peculiar since, after all, it was a piece of anatomy and thus technically lacked vital noise-making equipment such as lungs, a mouth, a throat. "First of all, what you did to yourself, and yourselves, was entirely your fault. You are dead. D - E - A - D. Dead. Deceased. Kicked the bucket. Took the long sleep. Dearly departed. No longer functioning within this mortal coil. Feeding the fishes. Food for worms, whom are crawling in and out and playing pinochle on your snout. Dead. Can I be any more clear?"

The final moments leading up to awakening in the waiting room were slowly unfogging, four thousand points of view which inevitable ended in darkness combining into one undeniable fact. Captain himself had personal memories of the cube being literally torn apart, hull ripped to pieces even as the attacker itself succumbed to its own fate. The very final thing he could recall was chaotic plasma lightning as the primary EM conduit passing his nodal intersection was sundered, followed by a sudden burning pain as the shunting capability of his exoskeletal armor was overwhelmed. Captain stood silently, reliving his own death, and that of the other drones of Cube #347.

"But we continue to live within the Greater Consciousness? Is this existence here ours as that echo?" Even as Captain asked the question, he knew the answer, or at least part of it. While the idea of doors and hallways was a very ordered, very Collective concept, blue creatures with holes in their torso, assimilated plants, and Directors were definitely not.

The Director rolled her eye. "Well, yes, technically your echoes are in the Greater Consciousness, not that the Collective draws upon the essence of your memories very often, for obvious reasons. However, I was able to pull a few strings, show off your series ratings, and get several good dice rolls. This all took time, you understand, bureaucracy being as it is. The good news - everything on what used to be Cube #347 will be resurrected!" Maria tacked on a final mumble.

Captain stared at the eyeball, translating the muffled words. "Repeat. Bad news?"

"Err," hummed Maria, "um, the bad news is that, well, there is a backlog, and there is a bureaucracy, and I had other commitments as well. You aren't the only thing on my plate, you understand. Anyway, er, let's see, how can I put this? You are scheduled to be reincarnated in the year 3013, Second Federation standard." Observing blank looks, she added helpfully, "Second Federation is the name of what used to be the Federation of your time. Quite a bit of history has happened since your vessel went boom."

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. An alarm beeped an electronic cadence. The Director sat up straighter in her chair, looking upward at something only she could see. "Well, flartz! I swear...." What she was to swear about was not finished. "Our time seems to have run out. Look, I'm really sorry, but I've got to get you reincarnated now. If I don't take this opportunity, well, the next chance won't roll around for approximately two thousand years, and, trust me, you don't want to be in your galaxy during that epoch. A Q convention, you understand." The eyeball shuddered. "So, ta ta!"

Room and Director began to fade. Something was nagging at the back of Captain's mind,

or the back of several other connected minds, but he couldn't isolate the problem. It was Second who finally managed to voice the worrying concern: "Everything? What exactly do you mean by 'everything'?"

If the eyeball heard, she did not bother to reply, else the sub-collective never heard any reply. Instead, with an innocent smile plastered on the face she didn't have, Maria Branson, Director, cheerily waved to the disappearing drones and threw the occasional kiss.

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Delta quadrant, Borg home system, 14.95 AU from stellar primary, year 3013...

A fleet of enormous spheres and cubes englobed a relatively small volume of space, a volume of space which registered a spatial phenomenon with artificial characteristics. No captains impatiently paced bridges nor adrenaline pumped helmsmen accidentally bumped thruster control buttons, for the Borg Collective did not allow such inefficiencies. Instead, singularity torpedoes and neutron-plasma beams silently waited to greet whomever, whatever, emerged from the phenomenon. While the Borg home system was unimportant in the greater scheme of Perfection, just one population and industrial node of many for an entity incapable of nostalgic feelings, it would still be quite embarrassing if the center of Collective-controlled space was successfully invaded.

The spatial phenomenon flared into the visible spectrum, disgorging an enormous amount of tachyons, in addition to other, less exotic particles. In the center of the storm formed a single shape, as wavering and unresolvable as a mirage seen hovering over desert sands. Weapons, already primed, prepared to fire.

Abruptly the anomaly snapped closed, disappearing from sensors as if it had never existed. In its place was a very small geometric form, a cube 1.3 kilometers on an edge, looking ragged and abused. Stunned, the Collective automatically identified the vessel as a pre-Dark Exploratory-class cube; and more specifically, from the automatic beacon signature it emitted, Cube #347, destroyed over five centuries earlier. What trickery was this???? However, it was no skullduggery, for with the appearance of the supposedly long deceased ship, a particular flavor of mentality, not quite sane from the point of view of the Greater Consciousness, was requesting reintegration on old fractal subspace channels no longer utilized.

The small cube powered up pitiful weapon systems, most of which were nonfunctional, powered down, powered up, and finally powered down once more. With no integration response forthcoming from the Greater Consciousness, and finding itself not immediately destroyed by the hesitant fleet of Very Large Cubes and Spheres, an audio hail was sent by Cube #347.

"Hello?" called a desynchronized Multivoice into the aether. "We've been told we would meet the Collective here? I think we've found the right spot. So, could we have a tow to the nearest unimatrix complex? We seem to have lost propulsion, armaments, navigational control, and there is a very overgrown weed we'd like to have removed as well."