

Listen up, Traks fans! Paramount (Global) 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 - Part 1**

### **Meetings in the Dark**

Year: 2416, January (Old Terran Standard)

The M-class planet - green, blue, brown, white - orbited a yellow dwarf star. It was the perfect colony world, rich in resources and lacking native sentient life. The parent solar system had the gasses, metals, and rare elements to support a budding civilization when it expanded beyond terrestrial confines. Unfortunately for the would-be planet speculator, the world was not only distant from most spheres of intelligent influence, it was already claimed, multiple beacons broadcasting a single message:

"Planet #8460-C under indefinite claim by the Hive. Trespassers, transients, and illicit colonists will be forcibly evicted. Further violations by the offending party will be prosecuted. Permanently. This is your only warning."

The transmission sounded Byzantine, but compared to the lack of warning only five Terran standard years earlier, it was very thoughtful. After all, why post claims when the Collective already owned everything?

A lone starship entered the system, apparently in violation of the warning. The form was Starfleet, futuristic in some respects, yet oozing an obsolete quality. It had spent over two months at high warp (including rest stops, shopping, and a sidetrip to see The Galaxy's Largest Ball of Green Yarn), a distance able to be crossed in only a week by the new transwarp capable warships entering Federation service. On the saucer section, chipped white letters glinted with silver flecks under bright floodlights - Secondprize - NCC-19296-C. An omnidirectional, voice-only transmission flooded local subspace channels.

"This is Captain Maxine Planck of the Federation starship Secondprize. We are here. Helllloooo? No, don't touch that button Ensign...do you want to flood the deck with laughing gas again? Okay, maybe later, but not now. What Lieutenant? We're still broadcasting? Oops. Umm. Okay, do over. This is Captain Maxine Planck of the Federation starship Secondprize. We are to meet \*rustle of paper\* Hive Exploratory-class Cube #347 at these coordinates. At least I think we are. When we obtained this assignment two months ago, dispatch was laughing at us."

No answer. One Captain Maxine Planck directed her Ops officer to repeat the message. He did so, neglecting to remove the asides. Secondprize continued towards Planet #8460-C at impulse, then slowed to a drift as a familiar ominous geometrical shape left the sensor shadow cast by the world's single moon.

"Hive Exploratory \*static\* #347 responding. We \*buzz\* you. \*Buzz\*static\* tactical

difficulties. They will \*buzz\*. \*Hiss\* suggest you maintain a distance of at least \*static\* kilometers. Sensor array \*static\* everything looks like an enemy and \*buzz\* at you," was the Multivoice reply. The cube looked dusty, as if it had run into a regolith dust cloud. Secondprize sensors confirmed the presence of pulverized moon rock as it neared.

The cube abruptly fired a low-yield - for Hive - tri-cobalt torpedo. It missed the Federation starship by several hundred kilometers, detonating with enough force to rattle shields. Secondprize veered off, her own weapons coming on-line.

"We \*static\* warned you. Communications nearly repaired. We are experiencing technical difficulties with our sensor-weapon interfacing systems. You must maintain a \*buzz\* ten million kilometers from this cube, else you will be mistaken for a target and fired upon. Repairs will \*hiss\* half an hour, Terran standard. Cube #347 out."

Captain Maxine "Max" Planck, most recent in a long series of Starfleet captains with the dubious honor of commanding a Secondprize incarnation, stared at the main viewscreen as audio transmission cut. Waving at helm to move the starship well beyond the range of the erratically weaving cube, Maxine began to pace in front of her chair.

Maxine was a tall woman, several fingers over two meters in height. More often than not, she found herself looking down upon upturned faces when she was addressing crew. Despite her size, she was not, and never had been, an athlete. Her frame was that of a person who tended towards thinness due to a combination of continually expended nervous energy and a propensity to forget the concept of lunch unless a sandwich was shoved under her nose. Maxine's face was nothing special, neither beautiful nor comely, although her deep blue eyes had caught the attention of more than one member of the opposite sex in her younger, rowdier years. Her hair, normally styled in a power bun, was an astonishing platinum blond, an obvious dye job because human hair did not come in that particular color. The dye job, usually done by Maxine herself and, thus, usually done in a hurry, could not disguise the true hair color, however, as she normally neglected to color the emerging roots near her skull. Blue. Maxine's real hair was a startling blue which matched her eyes. Questioning the captain about the hair was likely to evoke little except silence, and maybe, just maybe, a terse explanation that it was all her parent's fault, end of discussion.

The uniform Maxine wore was primarily black, with red stripes at the end of the sleeves and a red collar. Starfleet had recently redesigned uniforms (again!) and entered into a dark phase. The previous version, featuring colored bullseyes on the front and back of the torso, had proven vastly unpopular, especially among away team members sent on hostile missions; and the ensign "lost in action" statistic had reached a high in the annals of Starfleet only matched by the Kirk Era.

After several circuits past the empty Big Chair, the occupant of the Slightly Smaller Chair next to it drummed his hands on a set of knee bongo drums, creating a mellow percussion melody. "What say, Max-cat?" genially intoned the Klingon second-in-command Commander Varg Na'tor. "Your back and forth is giving me a serious case of tennis neck, daddy-o." While the Klingon wore a typical Starfleet uniform, little else about him was traditional. Dreadlocks, not a warrior tail or soldier cut, defined his hair; and expensive polarized sunglasses balanced on the brow of his nose. Beads were looped around Varg's neck, with thin bangles of silver and copper lightly tinkling on wrists. Unseen, beat the heart of a beatnik poet, bloody beatnik poetry. Varg /was/ a Klingon, after all, with peace and light fairly foreign concepts.

The deck pitched several degrees forward, then yawed sharply right before stabilizing.

Maxine caught herself against an arm of her chair, swiveling to allow herself to plop down on the embroidered cushion, as if such an action had always been her plan. Crossing her arms, she glared at the back of the helm's head.

Lieutenant Bobby Zzzghatix glanced over his shoulder at his captain, one hand dancing over console while the other fixed the blue antennae headband which had slightly slipped askew. Lieutenant Zzzghatix's personal history was long and complex, but included an unfortunate shuttle crash when he was a child, leaving the then young and impressionable human stranded as an orphan on an Andorian colony world. Twenty-odd years later, the product of alien upbringing, Bobby was convinced he was an Andorian soul trapped in a human body, no matter how much others (i.e., psychiatrists) pontified to the contrary.

"Sorry," said Zzzghatix, false antennae settled. "The last torpedo round came a bit close. I needed to do a little evasive adjusting." Despite his mental delusions, or perhaps because of them, Bobby was an excellent helm officer. Unfortunately, no other captain was willing to have him assigned to their normal ship and their normal crew. Maxine didn't have a choice in the matter, not that she complained too loudly as his skills had saved her skin a time or two, AND, more importantly, whisked her to various of the galaxy's odder tourist attractions just before closing time.

On the screen, Cube #347 abruptly accelerated towards the planet, angling along orbital vectors in the direction of the medium-sized moon. The cube grew smaller and smaller, becoming the size of a child's toy, then a keychain ornament, and finally just an occasional glint. Sensors were tracking the vessel, though, and the ensign at tactical - where /was/ Lieutenant Letaf this time? - announced Cube #347's abrupt halt in low orbit around the satellite. Moments later, fiery blossoms arose from the inoffensive chunk of rock.

Maxine made a Command Decision and said, "I think we'll let them work out their technical difficulties. Helm, take us to the second gas giant. One of the moons resembles a pyramid, and I want to take some pictures for my album."

Captain, also known as 4 of 8, current primary consensus monitor and facilitator of Cube #347, watched the Federation ship Secondprize prudently move away, sensors better than anything Starfleet possessed rendering the distant image with crystal clarity. The Hive, and more precisely the predecessor known as Borg, had known previous Secondprize incarnations, but this was the first direct meeting with the version registered as NCC-19296-C. Records noted it to have been constructed fifteen years prior, a relatively ancient ship considering the vessels Starfleet had constructed since the Commonwealth treaty, building upon the initial trickle of technologies released by the Collective.

The Secondprize hull was a modified Intrepid design, with "modified" referring to the ability of the saucer to separate from the drive section. However, records indicated the Secondprize had never done so for unstated technological difficulties. Additionally, the Secondprize which Captain observed was fundamentally different from its Intrepid sisters in a major way: final assembly had goofed, accidentally installing nacelles upside-down such that they extended below the fuselage, not above. Minor power and performance issues aside, the Secondprize resembled an overgrown, sleek version of the new Starfleet runabouts. The downswept nacelles also meant that while the Secondprize could, like all Intrepid-class ships, maneuver in dense atmosphere, it could not actually land on a planet without seriously damaging key components of the propulsion system.

While Captain's eyes passively watched the viewscreen (a new Soni brand ultra-deluxe

widescreen model) which hung in the nodal intersection nearest his alcove, the majority of his attention was directed elsewhere. Approximately five Cycles prior, a major mental paradigm shift had occurred to the Collective, transforming it from Borg to Hive. While Perfection remained the ultimate goal, assimilation of unwilling technological, biological, and cultural donors had ceased. The change had been wrenching trauma for most drones of the Collective. For the imperfectly assimilated aboard Cube #347, life had continued much as normal. The sub-collective remained the pariahs of the Collective, minds still a little too liberal, too undisciplined, too almost-insane. Besides, every prudent society needed a place to store square pegs that might prove to be useful at some future point, if only as wood to feed a fire; and the Collective, past or present, was loath to dispose of serviceable tools.

{Delta, cut the power!} futilely ordered Captain yet again.

{What do you think we've been trying to do? Paint the bulkheads?} snarled Delta, engineering hierarchy head, both of her, in return. {Weapons managed to reroute tertiary backup relays through subsection 8 while Sensors was regaling us with the latest composition assimilated from the annual species #6766 Pilgrimage. In doing so, he screwed up power distribution to impulse.}

{Subsection 8?}

{Subsection 8. A certain drone maintenance unit has been temporarily reassigned to engineering, effective immediately.}

Blinking, Captain shuffled through neural feeds, feeling the complex threads of the dataspaces as roster assignments were shuffled.

For over thirty Cycles, subsection 8 of the cube had been a no-drone land, a volume surrendered to a plant of immense proportion. In its native state, a bloodvine was a semi-mobile, domesticated vegetable that species #4182 had used to control vermin in agricultural fields. Many Cycles ago, 27 of 27, a vet in pre-assimilated life and still harboring a pet obsession, had adopted a cutting, with predictable consequences: accidentally introduced of nanoprobes. None were sure how the vine, nee Thorny, had exploded to its epic dimensions, but such had occurred. The engineering hierarchy had long confined the plant to subsection 8 with force fields, but no amount of fire, electricity, plasma, manual removal, vacuum, or an assortment of other destructive methods had ever eradicated Thorny. In a rustling, overly mobile jungle of green, silver, and gray vine and dinner plate sized leaves, a jungle with an eerie almost-intelligence, only one drone was guaranteed safety.

Doctor, 27 of 27, the drone maintenance hierarchy head, the sole drone comfortable in subsection 8, stared at an open access panel framed by giant leaves. The leaves swayed as if in a wind, although no breeze was present. Captain would have preferred a view expanded beyond the first person, but Thorny seemed to have acquired an aggressive aversion to all drones not Doctor, and especially the engineering hierarchy, primary instigators to an on-again, off-again labor of pruning; and the remote cameras occasionally installed always became obscured by greenery.

"Come on Thorny, don't blockums your mamma's workspace," murmured Doctor aloud as he gently brushed aside an intruding tendril. Inside the exposed bulkhead were several glowing blue conduits, each as thick as Captain's natural forearm. Engineering hierarchy overlaid schematics, labeling the conduits with the spidery runes which was Borg script.

{Disconnect A and B,} spoke Delta as the appropriate parts were highlighted, {and reverse their connections.}

Replied Doctor as one of his hand reached forward, holding a very low tech crescent

wrench. {I know. Just like surgery on a patient-watient, only a wee bit bigger.}

Reflected in metal, blue aura cast by conduit radiation, Doctor's rodent features were intently focused on the goal. Click click. Incisor teeth absently clicked and clacked together. The reflection dimmed, then disappeared, conduits darkening as they were disconnected from their sockets. Doctor was extremely agile, hand coordination a necessary prerequisite for a drone maintenance member, and so he had the minor engineering task swiftly completed. The transposed conduits flickered back to life.

Captain groaned as the lights on his tier level went out, as did lights all over the cube. And gravity. And life support. On the upside, power was now cut to weapons and engines. Conversely, sensors and shielding were also unavailable. All which remained functional was the Collective link, access to computer systems, and, for unknown reasons, Captain's viewscreen, although the picture was a scene of static. Ghostly keening arose in the darkness, followed the crash of shattering glass.

{If there is any, I repeat, any looting this time, the consequences will be unpleasant. Everyone shall have only /one/ alcove, not two, three, or more, when the lights return. And 140 of 480, stop those noises.} The moans halted.

Said Delta said: {Objective accomplished. Weapons' alterations are neutralized.}

The darkness was not bothersome to a Hive drone, who could see surroundings using other than standard visual frequencies. Similarly, magnetic soles rendered lack of gravity mere inconvenience; and loss of heat and oxygen replenishment systems were unimportant for a race engineered to survive vacuum exposure. The condition of cube defense and offense, however, was another matter, one which required immediate remedy. {Delta, fix us. Second,} continued Captain to the sub-collective's backup consensus monitor and facilitator, {police our potential pillagers.} He ignored the subsequent, and expected, sarcastic complaint.

The current configuration of Cube #347 hierarchy heads was not "natural," not the expected mixture of round-robin and lottery assignments. Captain had awoken to the mission knowing something was vastly different, disturbing. For one thing, it should have been 1 of 8's turn baby-sitting the sub-collective. Instead, in the quiet of a cube asleep except for a lone drone, the knowledge of the task had come flooding to a just awakened 4 of 8. This assignment was important, vital, and the most efficient hierarchy head configuration recorded with the current crew compliment had been resurrected. Captain - 4 of 8. Second - 3 of 8. Delta - 12 of 19. Sensors - 1 of 3. Weapons - 45 of 300. Doctor - 27 of 27. Assimilation - 13 of 20.

One had wondered at the time, however, why Cube #347 had been dispatched on such a weighty mission. Wondered very quietly, of course. The Borg may now be Hive, but Hive still frowned upon mere drones questioning the wisdom of the Greater Consciousness. Therefore, while waiting for Federation contact in the rendezvous system, many theories had been postulated, including the reality of the high risk nature of the assignment, a very possible one-way trip for which Cube #347 was expendable. The revelation of what ship Starfleet sent only complicated the situation, crystallized a previously low possibility scenario that Federation either did not take the Threat seriously, else thought the circumstances to be a trap.

Captain stared at his static filled viewscreen, the only visible nonthermal light source. Inwardly, he futilely reminded an unrepentant Weapons to behave himself. He also directed engineering hierarchy to {Hurry up,} an insistence which predictably fell on the deaf mental ears of the unlistening and very busy mentality which was Delta.

Barely into the mission, and already it was teetering on the figurative edge of a black hole disaster, ready to be flushed down the universal toilet.

Normalcy.

21 of 46 opened his eyes as 115 of 310 walked past. "Don't touch my hair, I warn you."

115 of 310 shuffled to a halt, turning to regard 21 of 46. Hair? Where had /that/ come from? He had simply been going from point A to point B, said destination being a repair on the engineering duty roster. Unconsciously his eyes raised to regard 21 of 46's head, which, like every other drone, was quite bald. A patch of buffed chrome highlighted a section of skull devoid of epidermis. "You have no hair," remarked the obvious by 115 of 310.

"I warn you," spoke 21 of 46, a rising tone of warning coloring the synthetic undertones of his voice, "don't mess with my hair! Anything, but the hair! You are planning something, I know it!"

115 of 310 stared, incredulous, "What are you talking about? You have no hair!"

Disengaging from his alcove, 21 of 46 stepped onto the catwalk. He placed his body protectively in front of a small niche which 21 of 46 had not noticed. Within the alcove was a rather sad brown topee, looking more like a bedraggled and mostly drowned rat than a hairpiece. The style was that of a ponytail and, for some odd reason, sideburns. "You are plotting to touch my hair! Don't!"

115 of 310 backed a step, raising his hands. "I am not going to touch your hair!"

The incomprehensible argument waged in the back of Captain's mind, one of twelve such currently occurring. In addition, in the past five seconds, one hundred fifteen attempts had been made to subvert various systems to satisfy personal whims, forty-one suspicious software patches and loops had been discovered and removed, two attempts at cube self-destruction had been averted, and the marathon had passed the half-way point at subsection 18, submatrix 1, corridor 32. All in all, it was a rather light censor load, except for the very annoying nature of the hairpiece accusation.

{Second, deal with 21 of 46 and 115 of 310,} ordered Captain even as he stood patiently, waiting for Maxine to complete the superfluous introduction of her senior crew.

Maxine paused in her introductions and blinked, a puzzled expression on her face, her head cocked slightly sideways in a posture of listening. "Captain Borg?" She hesitated again. "There is that noise again. It almost sounds like it is coming from you. Sort of like metal or fingernails dragged across a chalkboard."

Captain unclenched his teeth, locking his jaw to halt the unconscious grinding. He had picked up the bad habit a decade back and two Hierarchy of Eight rotations earlier; and since then had been forced to have his molars replaced three times by maintenance. While he did not eat, teeth were still necessary for speech, unless one wanted to talk to the unassimilated with an undignified lisp.

"This drone is not 'Captain Borg,'" reminded Captain to Maxine for the third time. "This drone may be addressed as 4 of 8 or Captain, not Captain Borg, nor Captain Drone, nor Captain Hiver." 'Hey you' was a preferable alternative as well, as far as Captain was concerned. Why did humans, and only humans or human hybrids, addressing him always feel 'Captain' to be inadequate, tacking on a 'Borg' or other addition nearly every time? Maxine belonged to the generation of people who had grown up in a time when Hive was known as Borg, and tended to add that old label instead of the current politically correct Hiver identifier.

{You are touching my hair!} wailed 21 of 46. Captain shuffled his attention to the loci, finding Second holding the apparently sacred toupee. Second was of average size, as biped forms went, his species' primary claim to biological fame being a double pair arrangement of eyes

instead of the normal two. 21 of 46 sobbed again, a mindless volley of sound, then physically attacked the sub-collective's second-in-command. Both fell to the floor in a heap, a very heavy 21 of 46 on top, a flurry of fists, elbows, and knees. A fascinated 115 of 310 stood a short distance away (it was his visual input stream Captain was riding), offering odds upon the outcome.

"Captain, um, just Captain. Are you listening? You are a little more blank than the usual drone."

Captain allowed himself a slight frown in response to the exterior distraction. "We are having slight technical difficulties, stand by." Internally: {By the whatever, Second, you are as tactful as ever. Give 21 of 46 the toupee.}

{Tact is irrelevant,} replied Second. He had ordered several weapons and drone maintenance units to his position, and they were pulling the enraged 21 of 46 off. Unfortunately, 21 of 46 was resisting all attempts at sedation, instead yelling for his hairpiece.

Huffed Captain, {Give it to him. We don't need this incident, especially not in front of witnesses.}

Second grumbled, {Fine.} He held out the now even more disheveled toupee. It was quickly snatched by the affronted 21 of 46, who promptly began to pet and croon to it like the hairpiece was a small animal.

{Doctor: adjust 21 of 46,} ordered Captain to a certain rodent drone. As acknowledgment was received, Captain returned his full attention to the situation at hand. "Technical difficulties resolved."

Maxine grimaced, then delicately asked, "Is it related to your earlier problems? Anything we can do to help?"

"No, and no."

Silence. The human senior helmsman with the plastic bobble antennae coughed. Maxine finally broke the awkward moment, "Okaaaay. Back on track, shall we? Perhaps you know why the Secondprize was dispatched out here? While I admit the scenery on the way was highly interesting, especially the Galaxy's Largest Pile of Burlap Bags - it had collapsed under its own gravity into a black hole, fancy that! - the tourist books have nothing out in this corner of the galaxy. Not even a Dillon's Tacky Souvenir Shoppe."

Captain opened his mouth to reply to the question embedded at the start of the babble, but closed it as Maxine continued, uninterrupted.

"Oh, but first, the rest of my crew. As I began to say earlier, this is my engineering chief, Lieutenant Commander Goth."

The named orange-skinned humanoid was unusual to say the least, a co-mingling of features which implied an improbable Ferengi-Vulcan parentage. The Lieutenant Commander had an expression on her face which shouted her desire to be elsewhere doing something productive, an attitude accented as she rudely buffed carefully manicured fingernails on her shirt. Her frame was the Vulcan frame, her features Vulcan features, and her hair straight, black Vulcan hair. Her ears...one would not want to grow up surrounded by the cruelty of child-to-child interaction with those ears. The orange skin was bad, but the giant Ferengi lobes with the suggestion of a Vulcan ear point were worse. As if sensing Captain's sudden and intense morbid examination (well, actually the sub-collective's, but it amounted to the same thing), Goth stopped polishing her nails.

"One comment about the ears, Borg-boy - and don't give me that Hive crap - and I'll disassemble you with the bluntest butter knife I can scrounge from the galley and ship your parts

back to the Collective on the slowest, smelliest Bolian transport I can find."

Comments which had been threatening to leap the censor barrier died. The warning had been directed to all drones, not just Captain, who, meanwhile, took two steps away from the temperamental engineer. Why were all engineers, no matter the species, touchy? Perhaps the attitude originated with supposedly benign warp core radiation.... Captain terminated /that/ particular line of hypothetical reasoning before it ripened, before Delta could take umbrage.

Maxine sighed. "Don't be contrary, Lieutenant Commander. Okay, next we have Secondprize's doctor - Lieutenant Richard Evans."

Evans stood quietly, hands behind his back, at a military parade rest. No blond hair with blue roots, no orange skin, no bobble antennae, Richard appeared to be normal, even boring. He was a human male of average size, of average build, of brown hair and brown eyes. He was the type of man who could lose himself in a crowd, one more anonymous face. Clearing his throat, Richard asked in an average tenor, "What about Ensign Mister Ible?"

Ensign Mister Ible? Captain's eyes darted from collar to collar, noting the lack of ensigns.

Maxine's face darkened. "And the doctor's assistant, Ensign Ible. Excuse me, Ensign Mister Ible."

Richard beamed as his hands emerged from behind his back. To be precise, only one emerged, the other clothed in a sock. The sock was a gray hiking sock with black toe and heel, made of a blend of exotic synthetics, nylon, and wool. Sewed on the sock were two bright red buttons, serving as eyes.

"How do you do?" queried the sock puppet. The ventriloquism was excellent, Richard's mouth remaining closed and the voice distinctly different from the doctor's. It was also very creepy; and there were very few situations which could alarm a Hive drone. Believing the wrath of an annoyed engineer to be the preferable option, Captain moved away from Evans and towards Goth.

"Not now, Ensign Mister Ible," said Maxine. Mister Ible pouted by hiding under Richard's armpit. "Continuing with introductions, I would introduce our tactical officer Lieutenant Simon Letaf, but he's in his quarters, unable to attend this meeting."

As an aside, Goth whispered to the be-antennaed Zzzghatix, "I hear he's having another breakdown: his virtual girlfriend dumped him for the ship computer."

"Lieutenants!" snapped Maxine in reprimand. "Whisper among yourselves later. As I was saying, for whatever the reason, Lieutenant Simon is unable to attend. My last crewman is Lieutenant Troy Minimin, who serves as science officer, Ops, and communication on the bridge."

Troy was yet another human on the standard human-heavy Starfleet command crew. His skull bulged oddly under his red hair, but other than that, he was, again, outwardly normal. He also looked to be quite young, less than twenty years of age. Of course, a similar first impression had been had for Richard Evans, before the sock puppet. Thankfully, Troy did not say anything, the youngster simply nodding his head and appraising Captain with a cold, calculating, 'I'm going to grow up to be a Q and add you to my bug collection' expression.

Maxine clapped her hands together. "Very good. Now, Captain, about this mission? I was told this was a goodwill, observer-to-the-Hive jaunt. Simple. To tell the truth, I know there was a bit more, but I didn't listen too closely. There were /so/ many plans to make for the trip here, /so/ many exciting sights to see, and the Admiral who was briefing me had the monotone voice of a Starfleet Academy instructor."

Captain stared at Maxine. Why was the admission not surprising? It was much more



efficient to be interconnected as a Whole, even if the part of the Whole considered was the Hive equivalent of a bad neighborhood, because it was impossible to fault a wandering mind as a reason for not receiving instructions. However, the sub-collective had prepared for the foreseen situation. "We have instructions. I will relay them."

As he turned his back on the Secondprize command staff and made his way to the wall which included viewscreen and audio-visual controls, Maxine asked, "Explain the whole 'I', 'we', and 'this drone' thing, would you? I've never actually met a Hiver face-to-face, understand, but I've seen the recruitment advertisements and taken the mandatory 'New Collective' series of Academy courses. As Borg, there was no 'I' at all, but now, although not always, there is. How do you decide which tense to use? Hey! What are you doing to my ship?"

Focusing on his goal, Captain ignored the clumsy attempt to draw him into irrelevant dialogue. The use of the first person instead of "this drone" to refer to self when in the presence of the unassimilated was a relatively new phenomenon within the "New Collective," as Captain Maxine stylized it, largely practiced by those whom had been voluntarily assimilated. The great majority of Hivers, however, retained the mental architecture and complete dissolution of individuality attained as Borg, and could not break the third person habit, be it singular or plural. The imperfectly assimilated of Cube #347, by contrast, had never really given up the first person in the first place, so the relaxation was not a spectacular change, except certain censor programs which had originally been installed for use when in contact with nonHive persons were now retired. This explanation Captain did not relay to Maxine as he placed his right hand on the controls adjacent viewscreen and triggered assimilation tubules.

"We must access this station to present information. The Secondprize computer will not be adversely compromised. I suggest you sit down." Captain said the latter as he turned to face the room, the use of "you" clearly plural.

Once the Secondprize staff were sitting in their respective chairs around the stylized hourglass briefing table, Captain began his presentation. The lights dimmed sufficiently to resolve the images to be shown on the screen, but not enough to trigger the sentient urge to nap despite the importance of the task. The overall situation hearkened back over thirty Cycles to one similar on a place called Waystation with a threat called They. This time, however, there were no obvious guns pointed at his person; and while They remained a threat, the bulk of They were estimated to be in intergalactic transit, while the current dilemma, the Dark, were here, immediate.

"The Dark, species #11086," began Captain, "are quasi-organic entities from beyond the rim. The basic structure..."

"Excuse me," interrupted Maxine, "but 'Dark'? Is that what this race calls itself?"

"We," Captain emphasized the Collective We, "do not know what species #11086 calls itself as it refuses to speak to any not its kind, and as we are unable to assimilate individuals."

Maxine continued her irrelevant line of questioning. "Why 'Dark' then? You Borg, er, Hive aren't exactly the most creative of people."

"It is the identification given by Hive allies and associates in the region of infestation. The Federation, being closer to the galactic hub, has had little, if any, direct conflict with the Dark; and the reports which are received are silenced to allow citizens to live their small lives in ignorance, at least until the information can no longer be suppressed. Recent examples include the Dominion War, the Diglin Incident, and the Wacky Wicken Chicken Incursion."

Confused faces peered at each other in the semi-dark. Troy piped, "I've read and memorized all my Starfleet history, but I've never heard of either Diglin or Wicken Chicken."

Maxine mused aloud, "This is an election year, as was the Dominion War. Say, Captain, did the other two things happen in election years as well?"

Captain turned inward as the question was cross-indexed. "Affirmative," he replied mechanically.

"That explains it." The others at the table nodded sagely in agreement with the Secondprize's captain. They seemed oddly undisturbed by the revelation.

"Enough digression," said Captain, censoring the impatience from his vocal synthesizer, "we continue."

"The basic structure of the entity is a black segmented cylinder. The average adult is two kilometers in length, with newborn offspring one hundred meters. The creature is largely organic, primarily fueling non-propulsion and non-defensive requirements by ingestion of food. Tendrils are exuded from the epidermis to manipulate objects. Complex metal and ceramic structures are existent, however, including transwarp devices, shielding elements, power core, and internal plate armoring of vitals. These structures are built by internal robots, which in turn are directed by the creatures. In addition, micrometer scale bots, a technological step behind nanoprobes, are present in the flesh." Accompanying Captain's dry summary, pictures both static and moving flashed on the viewscreen.

First, a rotating schematic of an adult Dark was placed side-by-side with footage of the actual entity. Captain did not divulge the clip had been among the final exterior shots from Battle-class Cube #3321. Twelve bulbous segments, a number which varied from individual to individual, fashioned the body, which in turn tapered fore and aft to blunt ends. The bow, the "head," was where food was ingested; and the stern was blind, for the creature appeared to utilize all which was eaten, waste gasses transported to the organic equivalent of maneuvering thrusters. The epidermis was a dull, matte black, although resolution in ultraviolet showed vast stretches of hull (skin) which reflected oddly, indicating a possible sensor system for an entity which otherwise lacked obvious eyes or other means to perceive the universe.

As Captain continued his narration, delving into the fabricated parts, the viewscreen frame showing the living Dark altered to display inorganic components as they were named. In most cases, blood, gore, and surrounding connective tissue had not been fully cleansed from the apparatus; and these pictures were taken from dissection endpoint. Captain could show the dissection processes, or in-situ views, but the time wasted waiting for Secondprize staff to reassemble after visiting the bathroom to regurgitate the most recent meal weighed against such a decision. As it was, a series of dry heaves originated from the science cum communications officer, especially during the power core segment which included a length of severed intestine. Both the Klingon and the human with the Andorian name appeared to be more fascinated than disgusted. The other crew members held carefully neutral expressions.

As the slide show continued, the macro robots and micrometer probes were displayed. The robots were twelve-legged spiders, a dozen arms with thumb-plus-two-finger grasping appendages attached to a central globular body. The hands were modular, able to be removed and refit with a variety of tools. The macrobots armspan was approximately two meters. The microprobes appeared similar, albeit on a much smaller scale. A combination of synthetic material and biological DNA/RNA scaffolding, the latter were of a size suitable to undertake fine work on constructed machines and crudely manipulate Dark cells. The micromachines were not as elegant as Hive nanoprobes, but they served many the same purposes, minus an assimilation role. They offered sufficient resistance to assimilation for the Dark natural immune system - a robust system practiced in fighting deadly radiation damage - to wipe out the few desperate Hive

attempts to proceed in such a manner.

"Adult, offspring, directed," said Maxine as she adroitly singled out key words. "Are you implying these Dark are intelligent? I mean, they look like, actually, your standard giant spacefaring animal."

Captain focused on Maxine. Perhaps she did have a couple of functioning brain cells in that head of hers, despite the blue-tinged hair and predication towards prattling. "Yes. The Hive would not provide a species designation if an entity was not sentient." The viewscreen altered to show a body segment of a Dark adult, skin and muscle pulled back and bone and protective metal plates removed to reveal a wrinkled gray brain, approximate volume that of a Starfleet runabout. Troy rapidly stood, made several nauseated noises, then ran from the room with hands clamped over his mouth, cheeks bulging. The door slid shut.

"The language is highly complex." Captain cued audio recordings. A moaning, chattering sound filled speakers, interspersed by clicks and croaks. It sounded like a choir of barbershop quartets composed of whales, crickets, monkeys, and chorus frogs. "Frequencies employed are on the subspace bands, much higher than that used by most other species for FTL communication. We cannot translate it.

"Concerning sentience, we postulate species #11086 were once beings of the ground, moving into space by altering their genome. Competing hypotheses include a religious aversion to spaceships, or a world which was metal poor, and, thus, could not support naval construction and associated infrastructure. As the Dark originate beyond the galactic rim where planetary systems are rare, and those which are present generally do not encompass large amounts of metal, the latter postulation is most probable."

"By the Hive mother," swore Zzzghatix, adding to the conversation a very Andorian philosophical twist, "so, do the brains taste good? Fried? Baked? Broiled?"

Maxine snapped, "Lieutenant Zzzghatix! We do not eat brains from sentient beings, even extra-large brains from giant organic vonNeumann-like organic machines."

Instead of being suitably chastised, Zzzghatix leaned sideways to swap brain recipes with Na'tor. The human sat up straight as his captain loudly cleared her throat.

"This is all well and good, but what is the purpose of Secondprize, then? If the Dark is so far from Federation space, why should we care?" asked Maxine.

Captain set the viewscreen to show recorded Dark footage. "The Dark creeps closer to your borders, as your high admirals are aware. The Hive can only slow the advance, not halt nor defeat." The admission brought looks of concern to the faces around the table. The Hive, and Borg before, were commonly thought by the unassimilated to be a juggernaut able to counter anything threatening it. "You will be an active observer. You will come with us to system #258.1-H, a refueling depot which was overrun by Dark three Cycles ago. The Hive requires tactical appraisal of the system; and you will accompany us to provide an unbiased first-hand account for transmittal to Starfleet. We need Starfleet assistance, as demanded per section Gh1-2, paragraph 34b of the Commonwealth Treaty, but the Federation is dragging red tape bureaucracy. As stated earlier, it is an election year, and initiating wars, even clandestine wars, are not popular in election years." He neglected to add the fact the mission was extremely high risk as the command staff once again nodded with brain-washed understanding of the unrealities present during elections.

Meanwhile, on the screen the Dark entity executed a graceful maneuver. Backlit by the disc of a yellow giant star, the silhouette smoothly shortened as the shape turned from broadside to head-on. Slowly, gradually, the circle grew large, indicating, for those unversed in basic

physics, the drawing near of the creature. Finally the shape eclipsed the sun, first a golden aura delineating edges, and then, just before the picture dissolved into soundless static, an infinite hole of black on black.

\* \* \* \* \*

Black on black, the sun rose over the limb of the gas giant to illuminate the flanks of the clan-pod. Twenty-two adults serenely rotated along their long axis, comfortably Singing among themselves and listening to the warbling gossip of other clans of the greater pod spread throughout the volume of local stars. Twenty-two adults, twenty-one of light-drinking black and one highlighted by gray mottles, secure, content, full.

Mottle felt the tightening of her epidermis as the twins within her grew. Already, in the ten seasons since this system had been claimed by her race, she had birthed thrice; and now six strong daughters were among those of the juvenile-pods grazing on the carbon-rich bounty of the Oort belt. These two, however, would be sons, sired by the pod strikeleader and hopefully destined to found clans of their own, clans to claim systems, clans to challenge other pods in the joyful game of supremacy.

A tendril manipulator was lazily extruded, grappling a chunk of what used to be a moon. No longer. It had been sundered and now served as an orbital larder for the breeding adults. Thus far, two other moons of the Jove planet had suffered the same fate; and while overall damage to the system was light, such would not always be true. As the first daughters reached breeding size in two seasons, followed by younger siblings in the seasons following, the clan would come to dominate the space. Given no unforeseen difficulties, in three years - nine seasons - the first clan-buds would leave to claim virgin systems. In ten years, the more than exponential growth possible by a race whose females could birth two to six pups a breeding season, and a race whose females outnumbered males five to one, would strip the system of edibles, of metals, of gasses, forcing all, even the core family-pod, to move on, to find new territory.

Mottle separated herself from the rest of the clan as nutritional cravings rumbled in her gut. Chirping her intentions, she rode the magnetic lines of the gas planet, finally turning to dive. Skimming the cloud tops, she was an organic feeding machine sucking hydrogen, helium, and other light elements and compounds into her body. She listened to the newest compositions crooned across interstellar depths by philosophers and Singers, and was content. This galaxy would support her race, shelter it, make it strong; and when all was said and done, and attentions were cast to the next galaxy, and the one following, her pod, her clan relatives, would be supreme. And perhaps, just perhaps, she would be there to witness.

\* \* \* \* \*

"How far, again?" asked Maxine her voice incredulous.

Captain replied for the second time, "System #258.1-H is 306 light years distant. Are your aural organs malfunctioning?" Captain focused on the Secondprize's senior-most officer with an intense, unblinking gaze only a Hive drone could muster. The staring had its desired intent, causing Maxine to unconsciously blanch and take a half step backwards before she could consciously recognize her retreat.

"I am fine," adamantly pronounced Maxine, "but 306 light years? That will take, um..." Maxine's eyes flickered upwards in futile mathematical concentration. "Lieutenant Zzzghatix,

tell the Hiver how long it will take us to go 306 light years at our best cruising speed."

Zzzghatix cocked his head sideways, setting bobble antennae to bobbing. "About forty, forty-two days. Well over a month, anyway."

Despite the fact Captain was physically apart from Cube #347, he was, as always, close to the sub-collective in other ways; and ever tied, albeit much more distantly, to the Greater Consciousness. The information which automatically flowed to him prompted his reply, "Unacceptable. We will arrive in system #258.1-H in eight cycles."

Goth snorted with disbelief that combined snide Vulcan nature with businesslike Ferengi. "Maybe you can travel that fast with that cube of yours, or one of the new transwarp-capable jobs rolling off the Starfleet construction docks. This ship, however, only has old-fashioned warp. Why don't you be a good drone and go ahead of us. I'll shovel some more coal in the furnace to push us as fast as we can go. We'll get there when we get there."

In the background of Captain's mind, among those designations watching the exchange through his eyes, one voice rose. It was Second, backup consensus monitor. {Can we assimilate her? She has an attitude I like!} Second was a master of cutting sarcasm.

{One has to /ask/ to-be drones politely now a'days, not summarily assimilate them,} reminded Captain to Second, who was well aware of the radical change in policy initiated five Cycles previously.

{I'm certain an exception can be made this once. Or perhaps there could be an "accident"? After all, Assimilation has nothing to do,} replied Second, referring to the head of the hierarchy least likely to see action on Cube #347, even before the involuntary assimilation moratorium. With his opinion voiced, Second returned to the peanut gallery of watchers.

The exchange occurred on too short a time scale for the nonHive present to realize the hesitation to be more than a simple conversational pause. "Unnecessary. Cube #347 will provide transportation."

"Wait just a minute!" exclaimed Maxine. "My crew will not be abandoning Secondprize to ride around on that vessel of yours. No beds, no showers, no food, no bathroom facilities. No." She cut a hand in front of her in a firm negation.

Captain stared balefully at Maxine before regarding all the crew. "Cube #347 has, on occasion, hosted the unassimilated. We do not care to repeat such experiences if such can be avoided." He paused, absently disengaging a command subroutine originating from 410 of 422, a command with potential to do Bad Things to cube integrity. "We will tow you through transwarp. The trip will require approximately eight Federation-standard days. Prepare yourselves. You have one hour. We will contact you prior to initiation of tractor beam." Captain locked a transporter onto himself and returned to Cube #347.

He did not bother to inquire why his alcove, and the four adjacent to either side, were smoldering, nor why cream pies had apparently been used as a substitute for extinguisher foam. The important thing was the mini-disaster was under control with the appropriate fire suppressor tools, and the largely cosmetic damage would be repaired prior to his next regeneration cycle. Instead, he focused on Weapons, preparing to impress upon the volatile head of the weapons hierarchy why the Secondprize would be conveyed safely by tractor beams (on threat of relinquishing control of that particular system to Delta and engineering) and why the Federation ship would not be blow up simply because "it existed and was target shaped."

"Hail from the cube," said Troy. He had since recovered from his embarrassing exit from the bridge briefing room.

Maxine looked over her shoulder at the brainy, but yet oh-so-young, Lieutenant. His generation of officers and crew had never really come to fear the Hive. Of course, Maxine herself had never locked horns with the entity she had grown up knowing as Borg, but still, her education had emphasized the dangers of the Collective. The last she had heard, the Academy had a politically correct curriculum for incoming freshmen entitled "The Hive Is Our Friend!" in an attempt to show how thankful Starfleet was for advanced Hive technology, won't you give us some more, please? "Well, answer them. You are smart enough to pick up the phone when someone rings, aren't you?"

Troy stared in response, confusion furrowing his large expanse of forehead.

"Never mind. Archaic reference," muttered Maxine. "Put the hail on-screen."

On the forward viewscreen blinked not Captain's implant shrouded face, but rather unending rows of catwalks. It appeared the cube was to be "official" during this conversation. Maxine was squinting to focus on what seemed to be a wisp of smoke on the right side of the picture when the Hive Multivoice sounded. "This is your final warning. Time to tractor lock is one minute."

"Excuse me," began Maxine, "you said you would give a five minute warning! We haven't quite stored everything." Protests were useless, for Secondprize's captain found herself talking to a blank screen.

Reported Ensign Xyster from tactical, one of a revolving number of low-ranking security crew filling in for the still absent security officer Lieutenant Letaf, "The cube is moving towards us, and rather aggressively if I may say so."

Cube #347, much larger than the target it was aiming at even as itself was the smallest class of Hive cubeships, neared Secondprize. At fifty meters it jerked to a stop, an armored mountain looming over the Intrepid-class Federation vessel. For several long seconds it was still, except for the faint green glow of ionization dancing around disruptor apature. Abruptly, a tractor beam arrowed from an edge, followed by a second and a third, catching the Secondprize in a secure three-point grip of manipulated gravitons. Unseen, a deflector envelope was extended to swallow the smaller ship, wrapping it in the protection necessary to brave the alternate matter hell which transwarp transversed. Then, without ceremony, a tear was made in the local space-time fabric, an opening which eagerly devoured cube and Starfleet vessel.

Alone once more, the planets of the rendezvous system uncaringly orbited their sun. The only trace of sentient presense was the fading signature of transwarp drive and diligent Hive beacons ever warning intruders to the system of their uninvited nature.

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Here ends Part I of Dark Rising: "Meetings in the Dark." Tune in next time as Cube #347 and Secondprize arrive in system #258.1-H to spy on the Dark. As sure as Lieutenant Zzzghatix's antennae will fall off, the scheme will not go according to plan, assuming, of course, they can reach their goal in the first place.