

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.

Dark Rising - Part 3 **Dark of Night**

Recap -

There are these two ships, see, and one was called Secondprize and the other was called Cube #347. And they did these things, see. Wait, wait! It gets better! See, and after they did things, the cube went away, leaving these drone dudes (and dudettes) on Secondprize. And then, and then, and then, this Dark, it, like, came out of nowhere and, like, captured Secondprize. Wow! Too bad that is where Part II ended...

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Year: 2416, April (Old Terran Standard)

Nurse carefully examined the strange object Eats-Too-Much had captured. Neither entity was bothered by the lack of ambient light, which was good because the sun was much too distant from the Oort cloud to be more than an overly bright star. Far from blind, the Dark possessed senses extending well above and below the limited spectrum of red through violet.

The Thing Eats-Too-Much had trapped, an odd creature not of anything formed or grown by Nature, was smaller than either adult or youngling, but remained much too large to be swallowed whole. A wide saucer was connected to a flattened cylinder by a short, stubby neck; and two long tubes were positioned underneath the mid-line cylinder, held away from the body by thick, curved planes. A gentle caress by manipulatory tentacles revealed a delicious, tactile maze, feeling and tasting a single combined sense complimenting visual. There were ridges and smooth spots, straight lines which formed elaborate shapes, and areas polished by abrasive dusts. Nurse deftly curled five limbs into every crevice. She tasted the sweet taste of refined ores mingled with the heady alloys that to Dark evoked the same qualities of a fine wine. Occasionally the object vented gasses, but it had stopped emitting the pinpricks of high energy phased light.

Nurse extended a sixth tendril near as she thoroughly explored. The limb had special sensors, ones which tasted for rare radioisotopes and other such materials. All things with the ability to artificially break the light speed barrier, with the exception of the wholly mechanical creatures whom called themselves Xenig, released one of several specific radiation signatures. Nurse confirmed the faster-than-light character of the object's exhaust.

Suspecting the identity of Eats-Too-Much's prey, Nurse engaged certain senses not

normally utilized. The process was akin to stretching a little employed muscle or unlidding a disused eye. Nurse's outspread electrical field, similar to that produced by a Terran knifefish, only on a much grander and more powerful scale, rippled. A response pattern of reflected echoes and fleeting shadows was formed as the local quantum field was caressed: Nurse scanned the odd object for life signs.

::Can I eat it? Can I eat it?:: Eats-Too-Much, the younger Dark, was growing impatient. She swung her catch away from Nurse, interrupting the examination. ::Is it good to eat, or poisonous?::

Nurse sighed, a process which undulated her malleable epidermis. ::Young Glutton,:: she said, invoking the adolescent's nickname, ::be patient. It is called a starship. You are of an age to be listening to the Philosophers and their arguments, to be taking an interest beyond the squabbles of your siblings. Philosophers claim a starship is a metal beast tamed by small organic creatures, alike in size to our macrobots, but made of linked carbon compounds.:: Nurse paused as Eats-Too-Much began to fidget, bestowing the equivalent of a skunk eye until the other had stilled. ::Anyway, the Philosophers have many theories. Before I tell you if the starship is edible, I will show you a trick. If you modulate your Singing in a certain way and coo simple baby phrases, and if you listen very carefully, the starship will reply in a manner which almost makes it seem intelligent.::

Intigued, Eats-Too-Much held up the starship thing for Nurse to demonstrate.

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"We are being hailed," said Lieutenant Troy Minimin, his expansive brow wrinkling with bewilderment.

Captain Maxine Planck was sitting in her command chair, securely buckled with the seatbelt that had become a standard starship option for captains and their seconds in the last twenty years. Therefore, while the rest of the bridge crew, other than a similarly secured Commander Na'tor, were the worse for wear due to the need to balance against occasional shaking (the Federation had tinkered with inertial dampers and artificial gravity for centuries, yet could not perfect a system to keep crew upright during sharp turns, much less monster attack incidents), Maxine was relatively unharmed. True, her hair was disheveled, power bun flying wisps around her face, but the damage could easily be fixed with a bobbypin and a can of hairspray. "About time. Put the Hive on screen."

The ship shuddered. "It isn't the Hive, Captain," replied Troy, "but the Dark, I think."

"I thought you were supposed to be brilliant, or at least that is what you always are boasting to us mere mortals," sarcastically shot back Maxine.

Lieutenant Bobby Zzzghatix swore as he tried yet again to break Secondprize loose from the grip of the tentacles holding the ship. A static warp bubble could not be formed due to unidentified interference from the Dark, assuming one was insane enough (Zzzghatix was) to use warp given the situation. Impulse was out of commission. All which remained was maneuvering thrusters, which had as much effect in assisting escape as did the phasers fired by the Vulcan crewwoman at tactical, the temporary replacement while Lieutenant Letaf was hiding in the Jeffries tubes writing bad poetry. Zzzghatix scratched his head, made sure his antennae headband was still in proper place, then tried tapping a new thruster combination on his console.

Troy did not respond to Maxine's comment. He was more than intelligent enough to know there were worse places to be than Secondprize. Amazing, but true. One example he had

heard whispered in tones of fear was inventory. A bad record on this ship would insure he would never have the opportunity to transfer to a place more fitting his genius.

"Put it on screen," finally ordered Maxine.

"Just audio, sir," uttered Troy. Before the captain could say anything, he transferred the hail to bridge speakers.

A drawn out whistle greeted listeners, accompanied by faint popping sounds, like a badly tuned analogue radio. Over the interference, however, distinguishable words could be heard as the universal translator waved a magical software wand. The genderless voice was mechanical and halting, as if spoken by a parrot with an artificial larynx. "Hello. Little organic. Things or metal. Creature with parasites. Respond." The communication paused before repeating.

Maxine unbuckled herself and stood, one hand carefully left in contact with the arm of her chair just in case. Na'tor remained safely secured, stretching for the bongo drums which were never far from his reach. He began patting a quiet background roll. "Greetings. I am Captain Maxine Planck of the Federation starship Secondprize. If you will release my ship, we can talk like civilized beings."

A long pause, then, "It talks! Hello. Toy. Talk some. More!" The new voice was as neuter as the opening hail, but the cadence was slightly different, younger, more impatient. Both Dark apparently had the ability to communicate.

Maxine allowed herself a small grimace, glad there was no visual to reveal her expression. "We would like to talk, but it would be much easier if you put..."

"Are you. Metal creature with. Parasites or little. Organic. Things?" asked Dark One, interrupting the Secondprize's captain.

"Well," began Maxine, "there are many different species of us on board. I think we are what you refer to as little organic..."

Dark Two shot a question: "Can you. Sing? Sing, toy!" The Secondprize wobbled as it was lightly shaken for emphasis. It appeared the younger voice was associated with the original ambusher, the smaller of the two spacefaring entities.

Na'tor rolled his bongos slightly louder as Maxine tried to answer, "Um, what type of music? We have a Bolian duet on Secondprize, and a passable barbershop quartet as long as you like western songs. There is also an ensign who sounds just like Zigia Carri. We also have many, many files..."

Dark One: "How can. Little organic things. Tame a metal creature. And. Navigate the black. Ocean? The Philosophers Sing..."

Dark Two: "Sing! A story! Toy! Sing! A story!"

Both Dark voices continued two very different lines of conversation, each ignoring the other. As Voice One began a complex, halting discourse of what appeared to be a philosophical inquisition requiring the Secondprize crew to justify their existence, the other repeatedly demanded a story song. Varg stopped playing bongos. The formerly silent Dark whom the Hive claimed did not speak to those not of their own species were actually quite chatty. Of course, the Hive were not known for their conversational skills, nor for their patience to learn what could not be assimilated.

"Captain?" asked the commander as he slid his bongos under his chair.

Maxine pointed to the back of the bridge, "You, crewman at tactical, you are a Vulcan and know all sorts of logic stuff; and Lieutenant Minimin, you are a genius. Argue with the Dark who wants to know about us 'little organic things.' Try not to convince it we are bugs to be squashed. Everyone else, tell me your favorite music that narrates a story. If we bargain, we

might persuade the one who likes singing to let us go." The bridge quickly became a busy place.

The sub-collective of Cube #347 pondered what to do. When the attack had begun, the engineering drones aboard Secondprize had been ordered by the Vulcan-Ferengi hybrid chief engineer Lieutenant Commander Goth to desist and stand aside, else face the consequences. It was highly inefficient for the Starfleeters to discard the powerful and adaptive tool the Hive drones represented, any one of whom could outperform a half dozen of the Starfleet engineering crew. Delta had gone to great lengths to insure those chosen for the mission were reliable. The same comparison could not be made for all drones, even in light of Secondprize's inadequacies. Therefore, the situation saw Delta, body A, screened by a stationary huddle of her hierarchy, linked to Secondprize's systems to keep the sub-collective apprised of the developing crisis.

The Collective, as always, was a very distant, semi-interested party. Very little direct support was offered beyond routine access to data archives and prodding if there was excessive divergence from an assignment. The rearrangement of Borg psyche to Hive had not fostered a closer relationship to the imperfectly assimilated, even if the new thought patterns had been in part modeled after the wayward sub-collective. A sane personality dipping a toe into the pool of insanity is quite different from leaping full in without a life jacket.

So far the major revelation learned by eavesdropping on bridge activities was that Dark could communicate, although they did so in a manner which suggested talking down to an overly bright pet. No Dark had ever attempted to talk to the Hive, a fact which was not surprising as the Hive had never tried to talk to Dark; and likely any nonHive ships which might have been the recipient of Dark conversation were swiftly dismantled and eaten when the Dark had tired of chatting. On the bridge, neither Dark were really listening to the responses provided to them. Nonetheless, Maxine and crew continued touchy-feelie Starfleet protocol, achieving nothing.

"Hivers!" yelled Goth as she leaned over the mezzanine railing of Main Engineering, looking down.

97 of 240, as closest, lifted his head to regard the chief of engineering squarely. "You are talking to us." It was a statement, not a question.

Goth waved a spanner. "Yes, I'm talking to you. Do you see any other Hivers in this room? No. I've changed my mind. Get your metal-plated butts in gear and help me keep those Dark things from tearing Secondprize apart. I've too many repairs and not enough competent hands. Now, move it!" She glanced downwards several long seconds, then snapped her head to regard a loitering crewman on an upper walkway. Snatching a PADD holstered at her side, she input a short alphanumeric code, then grinned in self-satisfaction as the crewman turned unnaturally pale before stepping up his tempo of repair.

Delta disengaged herself from the Secondprize computers. She and the other twelve drones had work to perform, but it would not be quite what Goth or Captain Maxine expected.

110 of 310 reported, {Final connection is complete.}

Under guise of repair, the Hive drones on Secondprize had scattered all over the ship. Their task primarily required awkward movement through Jeffries tubes even more ill fit for the standard bipedal cybernetic form than Cube #347's interstitial spaces, but they also moved openly on the decks, much to the discomfort of crew. The Jeffries tubes were...interesting, hiding a wide assortment of caches illegal, legal, and esoteric; unusual murals; discarded food wrappers; and one lone human male so busy composing something on his PADD he seemed unaware of the Dark attack, much less unsupervised Hivers.

Coordination between the wide-flung individuals would have been very difficult for the unassimilated, but for the drones such connection was automatic. It helped Delta was nearby to "emphasize" the importance of tasks. Thus far, a small fusion reactor was constructed between decks 8 and 9, shielded by ship replicator and sanitation reclamation facilities. The reactor was spliced into Secondprize's power distribution grid, and thence the grid shunted to the hull.

It was apparent the small Dark was not to let the Secondprize go, no matter the number of pop Klingon rock albums played. Similarly, efforts to force the issue via maneuvering thrusters and phaser had failed; and the range was too close for the low yield torpedoes Starfleet used, torpedoes the Collective knew would have little effect. Other measures were required.

"Honor! I'm going to have honor forever, I'm going to battle all night. Might! I'm going to have honor forever, and no one again will ever be somber!" The pop rock tune, sang to the ancient Terran song "Fame," was screamed by female Klingons in their language. It was a scary experience for most people, but not as bad as the music video. Na'tor, although Klingon, did not particularly like the music, instead enjoying a quite different genre. Dark Two, however, appeared to adore the primal passions evoked. Meanwhile, the Vulcan crewwoman and Troy were in deep philosophical discussion with Dark One using many words Maxine did not know existed, much less could define. She was unsure how peanut butter toast had become a central point to their theorems.

"Again! More. Songs, toy!" called Dark Two as "Honor" ended.

Maxine sighed. Like her second-in-command, she also did not appreciate Klingon pop rock. Just as she was about to order the next song selection to be played, a horrendous screeching began. Moments later, it transformed into a duet. Secondprize trembled as it was lashed violently back and forth. Unfortunately, Maxine was not seated with her seatbelt engaged this time.

Doctor Richard Evans stared at a sick bay wall, a small smile of joy stitched across his face. On the doctor's right hand was the ever-present sock puppet Ensign Mister Ible. The expression of the puppet was of slack-jawed insanity, one of the few faces capable to a hand-manipulated sock.

"Again!" shouted Evans, echoed a beat later by the higher pitched voice of Ensign Mister Ible. "Again!" ("Again") Evans reached out to touch the metal wall with his unsocked hand. His eyes opened wide with pleasure as electric shocks coursed through his body. The feeling reminded him of a place where he had spent a long time, a place he thought of as home.

Elsewhere, unlucky crew were not as entranced by their shocking experiences as the Secondprize doctor. In areas of not-quite-perfect insulation - primarily Jeffries tubes, but also the occasional wall, floor, ceiling, door, and, in one case, toilet seat - crew danced wildly as people sought safety, places where one could escape feeling like one was on the receiving end of a cattle prod. Bridge personnel were not directly affected due to the long practice to add extra insulation to the command areas of a starship, but the continuous shower of sparks from an abused console indicated something was wrong, as did events unfolding outside the ship.

Dark, by their very nature of being a spacefaring organism, were highly tolerant of electrical charge. A Dark in its preferred Jovian environment aligned itself parallel with the magnetic field lines looping from pole to pole to minimize conductive potentialities, but on occasion it was necessary to lie at other orientations. As immense bodies approached perpendicular alignment, greater and greater current ran through Dark bodies. In truth, organic flesh is a poor conductor and the amount of electricity experienced could never approach that of

orbital generators, long ropes of metal alloy slashing through magnetic fields, but it was more than sufficient to fry any organism not hardened to it. Dark resistance to electricity was large, but not quite large enough to dissipate the magnitude of voltage flowing from Secondprize. Physical contact with the hull only made the situation worse.

If one could hear and understand Dark on their natural communication frequencies, "Hot!" would have been the first word uttered by Eats-Too-Much, followed by a string of species-relevant profanity.

The young Dark holding Secondprize could not rid herself of the toy which had viciously turned upon her. Deep layers of epidermis literally melted on the hull of the starship, and no amount of shaking by the panicked adolescent could dislodge her burning attacker. A moment of calm amid the maelstrom of fright would have reminded Eats-Too-Much that she could simply shed her exuded tentacles, sacrificing flesh. The solution did not occur, and the Dark only wished to drag back her arms unto herself, an action synonymous to a human sticking a finger into his or her mouth after burning it.

Unfortunately for the Dark, the increasing amount of electricity, jury-rigged mini-fusion reactor stoked by Hivers with products extracted from the extensive Bolian portion of the waste reclamation system, was beginning to scramble the youngster's intrinsic electromagnetic field. Used as both intimate communication with conspecifics and as a sensory apparatus, the always extended field relied upon a delicate balance of electrical potential between muscle and nerve cells. The cells were arranged as a complex system of lines stretching rostrum to tail, just below the thick dermis layers. Damage proceeded swiftly inward, disrupting major organs, until the brain was reached.

Secondprize found itself flung free as a storm of seizures begat a series of convulsions of the young Dark's body. The ship tumbled away from former captor, festooned in the carbonized remnants of Dark epidermis. Nearly a minute was required for thrusters to dampen the spin. By the time a steady horizon had been established, 1.5 kilometers of Dark was still, dead.

The larger, adult Dark had suffered as well, although not to the point of death. Intimate contact of the two Dark electrical fields had allowed sympathetic feedback; and injury was apparent by the open sores on the adult's skin as well as the slow rolling as it began accelerating away. The vector led insystem; and Secondprize, her own systems and personnel seriously shocked by the inappropriate electrification of the hull (an action the service manual specifically warned against, with the added note that to do so voided all manufacturer warranties), was in no condition to pursue.

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Nurse hurt. No one could hear her pain, hear her warning, for she had been struck mute. Both subspace and radio were closed to her. The only method of communication available was via electrical field, which required close proximity to another pod member. Eventually she would heal, would regain her voices, but the message she carried could not wait.

Dark were not computers; and unlike a starship of steel and silicon that could pinpoint where its ills originated, such was not possible for Nurse. Like the majority of entities which were largely organic, the exact cause and locale of pain was difficult to determine through self-examination. Nurse had an idea which nerves were burned, but no specifics. Her internal bots, a largely autonomic component of her immune and tissue regeneration systems, were already crawling in the direction of the injury, lured onward by the scent of secreted hormones.

However, a diagnosis of the exact problem from a second Dark would speed the process.

Cruelly, while Nurse could not speak, she could still listen and see. Most of the breeding adults of her pod remained in orbit around the Jovian feeding grounds, unaware of danger in the outer system. The invader, be it a lone scout or the vanguard of a much larger assault force, had to be repelled. With sexual maturity came the hormones which fostered development of offensive weaponry beyond sheer bulk: only breeding adults had the ability to defend territory. And territory would be defended, younglings would be safeguarded, the intruder would be destroyed.

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For the last twenty hours Cube #347 had been moving as rapidly as circumstances permitted toward the Oort cloud. The cube was currently cloaked by a modified Type 18 device, and the need to keep it on-line prevented the large ship from traveling faster. The cloak mandated a speed limit, beyond which the device was highly likely to fail; and the device was the only thing concealing Hive presence from Dark notice.

The drones on Secondprize were functional, although Captain Maxine had ordered them confined to the brig. The sub-collective had tried, through Delta and the other Hivers present, to logically enumerate, one, the Collective and Federation were on the same side by dint of the Commonwealth Treaty; two, the Dark captor had been killed and the other driven off; and, three, forcefields did not a brig make for a Hive drone. Humans, however, were well known for the ability to selectively shut down the logic centers of their brain. Focusing on the unauthorized action which had sent twenty crewmembers to the capable, if dubiously besocked, hands of Dr. Evans, Maxine had called for the drones' restriction. Delta and her engineering comrades had complied, not because of the Starfleet captain's order, but by sub-collective directive to humor her.

The signature of the limping Dark became increasing prominent as Cube #347 neared.

Within the dataspace warred two primary opinions upon what action to take. One side, advocated by Weapons, argued to engage and destroy the crippled Dark. It appeared the insystem Dark had not been alerted as to the presence of intruders, and Weapons thinly veiled his desire for large explosions with the logical argument concerning the need to permanently prevent the in-moving Dark from communication. On the other hand, the energy required to destroy the Dark, assuming Cube #347 could do so successfully, would certainly alert any observers that intruders were present, and that the invader was a Hive cube.

Five light minutes. Three light minutes. One light minute. A million kilometers and decreasing, inward Dark vector and outward Cube #347 path would soon improbably approach near-intersection with a less than one hundred kilometer separation. Neither entities had altered course after plotting original trajectories; and the odds they would pass so close by chance was astronomical.

{Destroy!} exclaimed Weapons, pent up frustration at not blowing up anything for the last several months (BorgCraft battle simulations did not count) edging his words in hues of blood. The distance to target was two hundred kilometers.

{No,} stated Captain, yet again. He wove the voice of reason from many mental threads into one solid block.

{Destroy!} Visions of atomic bombs, shrapnel fragments, nova suns.

{No.}

{Destroy!} The sight of a lone torpedo, arching away on green exhaust. It struck the Dark on its flank.

{No.} Captain waited for the expected response, but none was forthcoming. Had Weapons finally given up? Of course not. The emotion of satisfaction that replaced urgency was no indicator of capitulation.

{Sensors [willow] a change in aspect to Dark [cherry], likely [puffy chair] by torpedo strike,} calmly reported the insectoid Sensors, vocal summary of incoming sensor data. The torpedo had not been a figment of Weapons' vicious imagination nor leakage of a BorgCraft scenario, but rather an impulse that had survived unscathed through the extensive labyrinth of sub-collective censor processes. Desired or not, a fight was now inevitable, previously debated choices all moot except one.

Dampening of the energy signature powering the cloak must have been imperfect, for once aroused to the presence of an enemy, the Dark unerringly focused upon Cube #347's location. While communications for the Dark were crippled, as were aspects of propulsion, long distance weapons were functional. Pustules furrowed on the Dark's skin, erupting to reveal small slivers of metal. Individually the torpedoes were insignificant. In the numbers a Dark was capable of producing, until munitions-construction resources ran low, they were devastating to shields.

Relatively small compared to the behemoths preparing to engage in battle, each Dark torpedo was a metal spear ten meters long. To the backbone was attached a simple guidance device (if it wasn't Dark, kill it), a moderate one to two isoton yield explosive, and an engine. As the first 104 missile wave impacted cube shields, the cloak was dropped before power surges could fry the finicky device. Cube #347 responded with its own torpedo barrage as it began to turn in a defensive spin. Its own weapons were less numerous, but of greater destruction.

The two opponents moved close, shields flickering with each direct impact of long distance munitions. It was impossible to determine which had the advantage. In a fair fight, one on one, the larger Dark could easily defeat four Exploratory-class cubes. However, in this case, the Dark in question had been injured to an unknown extent, and its performance clearly showed a hesitance which might be attributable to senses and body not working at one hundred percent. On the other hand, Cube #347 performed suboptimally in the best of circumstances when compared to a normal sub-collective; and despite Weapons' haranguing to the contrary, the cube was outmatched. It was not surprising the first shields to drop were those of Cube #347.

{Primary shield grid damaged. Secondary shield grid damaged. Tertiary shield grid inoperable due to missing elements at junctures 2a, 6b, 7d, 10.3c, 174f, 1501a...} calmly reported the computer, unaware in the bliss of silicon ignorance the death sentence it was pronouncing.

Delta, body distant from the action, nonetheless was an immediate presence within the intranets. {Missing? Missing?} All the junctures in question were located in the vicinity of subsection 11, submatrix 13, a suspicious coincidence of which there was no time to investigate. Delta instead swiftly assigned a string of designations to repair damage to primary and secondary systems, as well as attempted to bludgeon the computer to reroute around the missing linkages to resurrect the tertiary shield grid. In the Secondprize brig, both of her bodies began to pace back and forth through the forcefield, much to the consternation of the single guard on duty. {Faster! Be efficient! I will not be abandoned on this Federation ship.}

The cube would be unable to reinitiate shields before the next incoming wave of eighty-seven torpedoes impacted. Already the missiles were bunching into a concentrated ball, purpose to produce the greatest amount of structural damage possible, as opposed to the previous diffuse

arrangement intended to tax shields via kinetic overload. The cube was too massive an object to include evasive maneuvers in its vocabulary; and disrupters could only destroy a few targets once the mass moved within range of short-range weapons. The sub-collective braced for impact.

Seventy-five objects, those which had survived disrupters, hit with gunfire rapacity against subsection 8. Thirty meters of armor, hull, and exterior support melted under the onslaught. Several muffled thumps, indicating explosive decompression of sub-hull corridors, could be felt in subsections on the opposite side the cube from the damage.

Subsection 8 was empty of drones due to the extensive presence of the invasive bloodvine Thorny. Therefore, there was no loss of Hive units; and while it appeared to the uninitiated exterior observer that the damage sustained was severe, in actuality, the greatly noncentralized systems of the cube regulated the injury to categories of "minor" and "cosmetic." Or, the damage would have classified as such, except the final impacts had punctured the outer casing of warp nacelle segment 3b, one of the tri-segmental warp nacelles located twenty meters under each cube edge. The plasma...did not react well, to put it mildly, with the concussive force of an isoton explosion immediately adjacent to the nacelle thermos. The cube had just enough time to isolate the segment and retune magnetic restraint fields to direct the violently venting plasma into space. Most of it, anyway. The superstructure skeleton of the cube groaned an answer to the fiery question, then screamed as a major support spar twisted. It was not a sound to inspire happy thoughts among engineering. The harm signified need to withdraw to a quiet locale for several cycles to allow drones and cube regeneration systems to affect repairs.

Battle advantage had just been handed to the Dark.

{Thorny!} wailed Doctor, aghast, a single, overriding concern on his mind, a concern he felt needed to be voiced to the entire sub-collective. {Thorny, baby! Poor planty-wanty.}

The planty-wanty in question, which had shown a near miraculous resistance over the years to a diversity of eradication attempts including vacuum, fire, plasma, and hack 'n' slash was likely less harmed by the impact than the cube.

Cube #347 slowed its defensive spin, rolling the gaping wound away from immediate danger. A tentative shield flickered into existence, then strengthened as primary and secondary shield nodes were repaired. The tertiary system remained off-line, and likely to stay that way in the foreseeable future, as engineering teams shifted priorities to stabilize the superstructure. If the superstructure was not sound, the ship risked catastrophic failure, literally twisting apart under external stresses of battle, warp, or transwarp. An auxiliary core revved from idle to active to compensate for power demanded by energy-hungry ship repair functions.

The cube withdrew, much to Weapons' distress, but to the relief and encouragement of the rest of the sub-collective. The battle had reached a stalemate, the cube slowly backing away to disengage from the long-range munitions envelope. The Dark, however, pursued at an equally leisurely (limping?) pace. Both combatants continued to slap at each other at extreme torpedo range, with Dark darts once more deployed in a diffuse pattern. The Dark was also spending less and less missiles with each successive wave, a pattern recognized by the Hive as a sign of imminent torpedo exhaustion. The next stage of battle would soon begin, assuming the Dark followed the model exhibited during past Dark-Hive engagements.

As the last Dark torpedoes smashed ineffectively against cube shields, engineering teams reached the superstructure components registering the greatest amounts of stress, teetering on the edge of failure. The trek had been arduous, requiring disassembly of bulkheads, rerouting of local systems, and difficult squeezing through interstitial spaces. Among the first scouts to arrive at the injury sites to act as eyes (and other senses) for the sub-collective to appraise the situation

was 2 of 3, a centipede-like entity able to move easily in confined places, and three Lupil, a reptilian species with the inherent ability to selectively dislocate most body joints, a capability carefully preserved by the Collective after assimilation due to the advantages the unusually agile drones conferred to engineering and assault endeavors. What the four drones discovered was highly disturbing.

{Thorny!} exclaimed Doctor. The ex-vet was the totality of a minority of one who was delighted to see the plant.

Wrapping the immense girder like green and gray duct tape, branches and tendrils wedged into the most minute of cracks, it was readily apparent Thorny had escaped incineration in subsection 8. Dinner plate leaves lent a jungle atmosphere. When and how was not important at the moment, although fleeting thoughts drifting in the fluidity of the dataspace provided passing theories to examine more fully at a later date. What was consequential was the extreme lateral twisting the main spar had undergone, much more severe than that reported by remote sensors. The reality of the situation? The despised bloodvine was the sole bandage maintaining integrity to the superstructure of Cube #347.

Thorny's leaves rustled as flashlights flooded the darkness, turning to better drink the proffered lumens. If one didn't know better, if one didn't know it was just a plant with no complex nervous system (with no nervous system, period), one might believe the action had a hint of menace to it, a daring to the drones to "mulch me, make my day." Menace was not possible for a mere nonsentient vegetable, or so the four drones in the presence of the bloodvine were reminded by comrades safe from twisting tendrils. The movement was simply motion, phototaxis.

{Thorny. Thorny. Thorny. Thorny. Thorny,} repeated Doctor.

Delta grumbled, {Shut up.} The brusque demand was accompanied by an image of a certain rodent drone sacrificed to Thorny as poisoned fertilizer, not that such an action was to occur since the exercise would unlikely damage more than a few vines before the plant adapted. Other engineering groups were discovering the bloodvine to have infiltrated additional sections of the superstructure. Cube #347 was infested by greenery.

Sensors announced, {Incoming.}

The second phase of the Dark's attack was commencing. Bereft of torpedoes and with no rocks in grappling distance, the creature was accelerating to reach short-range weapons envelope. Powerful organic phasers lay beneath the black epidermis, banks of crystalline lens apertures visible only when the weapon fired. If the cube survived an initial phase two assault, the Dark would bully through the shield, assuming such still existed, to make physical contact. Phase three consisted of a Dark tearing off chunks of cube, usually eating the bits. Cube #347's only chance was to blunt phase two, turn it aside.

The cube began to retreat faster to delay the inevitable. As it did so, it fired torpedo after torpedo, increasing isotonic yield as it did so. The missiles splashed off the Dark's own shield; and then, suddenly, they were blossoming destruction against thick flesh. Still the Dark forged onward, 1.8 kilometers of entity evolved for the rigors of space existence not an easy opponent to kill. Short-range weapons deployed, and now the cube found itself resisting violet tinged phasers even as it lashed out with first its own disrupters, then powerful cutting beams. The belly-to-belly contest was the equivalent of two titans flailing at each other with eyes closed.

Finally, it was over. Floating amid globules of freezing gore, wreathed within the cloud of a scene more fitting to slaughterhouse than space battle, the sub-collective of Cube #347 found itself alive and functional. The communal response was one of frank surprise.

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The breeding adult Dark in orbit around their Jovian feeding grounds uneasily watched the outsystem sky. Vast swathes of sensory patches scattered over ebony hide collected the story of a vicious struggle which had occurred between the orbits of the outermost gas giant and an immense rocky planet covered in a globe-spanning ocean of exotic frozen liquids. No subspace warning had been Sung; and only radiation particles trekking at the speed of light had alerted the breeding adults to the dangerous intruder lurking in their territory. Unfortunately, light did have a speed limit, and the distance the particles had to travel meant the fight was several hours done.

The skirmish unfolded with the characteristic signature of torpedoes exploding against shields. On one side was Nurse, the only adult currently unaccounted in the system. The weapons of the invader proclaimed it to be a parasitized metal box beast, one of the race of creatures which existed throughout this volume of space and from whom the pod had claimed their current territory. High yield explosives splashing on shields abruptly gave way to the flash of vaporized metal and burnt atmosphere, signifying a direct hit against the box beast. The breeding adults cheered, a sizzling pop-crackle in the radio frequencies of ethyl alcohol and oxygen.

The distant fight regained the monotony of missile on shield, then momentarily halted before slashing into the bright radiation decay signatures of phaser and disrupter. The information arriving from the small patch of space was intense, fast-pitched, and required great concentration to distinguish what was happening to whom. For the planet-bound, the act was akin to watching a jhadball match from half a kilometer away without benefit of binoculars: much dust and garbled noise, but little clarity. Finally the battle ceased. The final decipherable signature was that of the box beast.

Dark have a love for talking, gossiping, and singing. Live theater and oral tradition from the wandering clanless spread culture; the concept of television and radio did not exist. The box beast was long gone from the battle zone, and it would not do to rush helter-skelter to the patch of now empty space. Oh, the invader, be it one or the scout of a swarm, would be repelled from the territory, but for now, strategy was required. Strategy would find and flush the box beast. Strategy would kill the box beast. Strategy was the center around which pod discussions revolved.

From the gas planet which would be used in a few seasons by young adults moving insystem from the Oort cloud nursery, Mottle and Loremaster inquired if they should rejoin the pod. They were told to stay. Strikemaster desired two detection points to foster better triangulation if the intruder was sensed again; and, additionally, as the smaller gas giant was on the opposite side of the primary, that would deny the crafty box beast from hiding in the sensor shadow cast by the sun.

The pod began to Sing into the subspace ether, crying to distant pods of clan and family, to peoples both related and foreign, for information and advice. Have parasitized metal box beasts ever attempted to regain territory after eviction? If so, what actions did they take? What about other metal creatures with little organic things inside? What strategies might we pursue?

From the ether Sang opinions and stories, but never an offer of help. Even family-pods closely related by genetic heritage would be as little tolerated in held territory as the alien invader. Only desperate and stressful times would force near gene-families together into clan-pods, followed by clan-pods merging with increasingly distant relatives. Xenophobia encompassed even the known stranger who was of Dark race, the only exception the honored and

wandering clanless. If the family-pod was unsuccessful in holding territory, the system would be open for another pod to drive off the aliens and stake a claim.

That was the way it was and that was the way it always had been. The Dark knew no differently.

* * * * *

"This is disgusting," commented Zzzghatix as he peered out the window of the runabout Honorary Mention 78. Carrying the first, and only, shuttle replication system, the Intrepid class of Federation starships tended to promote a carelessness among their captains when it came to using auxiliary craft as cannon fodder, target practice, and evil alien disposal. This particular away mission included Zzzghatix as chauffeur, Na'tor as person-in-charge, and Dr. Evans with Ensign Mister Ible as medical specialists. Additionally, several low ranked engineering and security crewmembers recently enlisted were aboard, just in case difficulties like brain suckers from Dimension X were encountered. Also present was a Hiver, 10 of 19, who was standing in a corner like a piece of exceptionally ugly pre-post-modern-expressionist-existentialistic sculpture. For unknown reasons, the drone wore an aggressively yellow bowler hat at a jaunty angle.

Bop bop boop, went bongo drums. "I agree / with your insight / This cool Klingon cat is reminded of / Targ rindzinous blight," recited Na'tor.

After electrocution, the corpse of the assailant Dark had been left more or less intact. Ignoring strips of charred skin, the body was remarkably whole. Gossip and jokes during Secondprize's repair centered around what one did with a dead Dark. Several adventurous gourmets had suggested to Maxine that a barbecue was in order, but the captain was all for calling the "observation" mission a loss and retreating to a little planet she had heard about, a planet with seas of carbonated soda drink and a population largely comprised of people in the dental fields. Starfleet, however, had a different notion when contacted for direction, ideas which involved exploring the creature, on the inside. Protesting, Maxine had asked why her crew (not herself personally, of course) was being told to go spelunking in a dead creature, instead of cutting it properly apart for autopsy. After mumbling a muffled excuse which Maxine did not quite catch, the headquarters admiral had directed her to query her local Hivers, since the Collective was the one to make request of an intact corpse. As expected, none of the drones in the brig had answered, the group only stating the stock reply of "Explanations are irrelevant."

The initial, and follow up, conversation with Starfleet headquarters had occurred several days prior, as had the unproductive Hive contact. While Maxine had been horrified to see the condition of Cube #347 when it had finally appeared - if Dark could blow a giant hole in the side of a Hive cube, the Secondprize would go the way of a feather pillow struck with a shotgun shell, and the captain's days of trekking to unusual tourist spots would be over - she was relieved when all drones had transported back to whatever upright coffin they called home. Now, fast forward, Maxine had appointed Commander Na'tor to choose an away team to visit the corpse's innards via a hole drilled through flesh by a Cube #347 cutting beam. The drone had been a last minute surprise addition mandated by the cube.

Honorary Mention 78 drifted through an immense organic cavern. As spacious as the largest dry-docks the Federation possessed, the runabout was dwarfed. A faint red luminescence shed no light, the almost nonexistent glow originating from the wall of flesh which bounded the space. Exterior sensors registered a hellish atmospheric brew of acids able to dissolve most known material, including that of the runabout hull had the Hive not insisted on coating the

shuttle with a thin polymer film prior to the excursion. Here and there thin membranes hung, connecting walls to create compartments of varying size. Within the curtained areas the atmosphere differed greatly from that in the main room, ranging from near vacuum to oxy-nitro terrestrial norm to a noxious gas planet mixture. The purpose of these areas was unfathomable, although within a small vacuum compartment only slightly larger than the runabout itself, several chunks of hull from an unlucky ship had been discovered, origination unknown. The cavern was, as 10 of 19 finally deemed to tell the Honorable Mention 78 crew, the Dark's stomach, which also functioned as a modular hold able to store a wide variety of (swallowed) objects in different preservative conditions.

"A stomach!" exclaimed Zzzghatix. "Yuck! This thing is large enough to hold Secondprize, with room to spare. And what is up with that hat, anyway?"

The Hiver made no response, neither to the size comment nor the hat question.

The runabout explored for two hours. Occasionally it was attacked by twelve-armed spiders which spanned arm-to-arm the length of a tall man; the erratically moving bots easily succumbed to the runabout's phasers. While Na'tor eventually lost interest in his surroundings and began to quietly compose poetry which did not relate to the situation, Zzzghatix remained full of increasingly gross observations as well as outrageous notations about yellow hats. To the latter, the Hiver remained stoically unprovokable, although Zzzghatix could swear he caught the drone glaring at him through a narrowed eye several times. The expression, however, returned to smooth deadpan each time the helmsman attempted to catch it. Dr. Evans behaved as a serious medical professional should, jotting notes on his PADD; Ensign Mister Ible was content with only the occasional concurrence on an observation. The mission was utterly uneventful, nary an insane scientist with a new transdimensional hopping machine to be seen, a state of affairs the nervous ensigns and yeomen cannon fodder were happy to see continue.

10 of 19 shifted position, "We have seen enough. You will leave the carcass and return this drone to Cube #347."

Zzzghatix swiveled his chair, setting his antennae to swaying, "Hey hat-drone, plurals? All those we's and you's and this-drone's are confusing. What was the purpose of this little trip, anyway? Some of us may have liked this adventure," the helmsman paused as he gestured to a rear window where Ensign Mister Ible was blocking the view of an annoyed Dr. Evans, who didn't seem to realize he could remedy the situation by moving his arm, "but others, like myself, could have been doing other, more productive things, like..." Zzzghatix petered off as he tried to think of a good example.

"Playing poker," supplied a voice from a security tagalong.

Zzzghatix nodded, "Exactly, playing poker. Very important cultural thing, poker. The shrinks Starfleet keeps throwing at me always say I should integrate with 'my humanness via human games.' Since I've been barred from that Squares game for weapon violations, I guess poker fits the bill. That is probably the only good advice the shrinks have ever given me, all the rest of which is useless since only this body is human. It is the soul that counts, and I am true blue Andorian through and through." The helmsman pounded once on his chest to emphasize his point.

"Enlightenment of the purpose of this excursion is irrelevant," said 10 of 19, answering the originally stated questions and ignoring the rest.

"Somewhere, blood drips / drips down / on the battlefield / drips down / gives me honor," muttered Na'tor to himself as he fiddled on the fourth stanza of his composition "Peace and Honor" while ignoring everything else.

Zzzghatix wrinkled his nose, not at the poem's content, for he /had/ been raised on an Andorian colony and in an Andorian household, but because the Klingon had slipped deep into the world of creation and could not be bothered with minor things like real life. It wasn't the first time. "Fine, fine," said Zzzghatix as he set course to exit the Dark, "you will be returned to your cube. Do you know what that hat reminds me of? Well, let me tell you."

"This seems familiar," commented Goth. The senior crew was once more gathered in the bridge briefing room, with Captain next to the main viewscreen. He had one hand plugged into the room's audio-visual display system, allowing the sub-collective access via himself as the conduit. "So, what does the holy Hive have planned for the ship this time? Finishing installation of the cloak? Transwarp? Chrome bumpers? Assimilation? And I'm sure that all this mucking around in /my/ systems has been cleared by Starfleet bozos who have never held a spanner in their lives, correct?" The orange-skinned, big lobed Lieutenant Commander had regressed to a sarcastic attitude. Gains experienced in the arenas of trust and tolerance had been lost after Delta and her engineering drones had electrified the hull without the chief's blessings.

Captain stared at Goth. Goth stared back at Captain, a snaggle-toothed sneer curling a corner of her mouth. Captain gave up the irrelevant test of wills. The Look was capable of cowing nearly everyone, including strong-minded starship captain, with chief engineers being the overwhelming exception. The engineering chiefs of the universe lived in the trenches with their spanner-welding troops, unlike most ship officers, and, thus, dealt with a great many problems both mechanical and otherwise, problems which, if they could not be repaired, could at least be "fixed" with application of hammer or wrench.

Captain loaded a file from Cube #347's dataspace into the Secondprize computer. Triggering it to run, a colorful three-dimensional schematic of the Dark corpse floated on the briefing room viewscreen. While the Secondprize runabout had been exploring the cavernous stomach and dodging spiderbots, the cube had thoroughly scanned the rest of the body, confirming suitability even as Sensors' grid settings had sent several of her hierarchy to drone maintenance seeing sounds and feeling colors. Maxine and company were not going to like the proposal to be uttered. Too bad. The Collective had already gained approval to use the Secondprize tool in any manner the Greater Consciousness felt best; and a stealthy examination of communication logs showed the order had been delivered to Maxine.

The picture displayed the outline of the Dark. Inside, the stomach occupied a large volume, membranes crisscrossing the chamber in an accurate portrayal of current compartmentalization. Other internal organs, such as heart and caloric storage glands, were prominently colored, as were inorganic components of propulsion and the core which powered FTL engines. The inorganic elements in most cases were not fully built or lacked important constituents like fuel, indicating the Dark was not an adult.

Maxine spoke, "Okay. That's a nice picture, I admit, but what was the point of clambering in the creature's guts?"

Captain did not verbally respond. Instead he loaded the next file in the sequence and set it playing. On the screen, the complex three-dimensional schematic was replaced by a simpler picture, one consisting of Dark outline, stomach, and Secondprize. The starship entered the Dark's body, settling in the stomach. The action was followed by the transporter placement of explosives, symbolized as cartoon bombs, into the rest of the Dark. Next the scene pulled away to show the Secondprize-inhabited Dark moving insystem to the gas giant that Cube #347 had found to be infested by adult Dark. The Trojan Horse Dark entered the upper atmosphere of the

planet and exploded, sending a great sheet of fire flashing over the planet, engulfing the adults.

Stunned silence was Captain's reply to the show. The quiet did not last long.

Troy sputtered, "That...that's not logical! First of all, explosives don't produce a fire effect like that. Second, Secondprize will blow up...and that means I will as well! I'm too young to die, especially if it happens before I transfer off this boat!"

"That is a classic Trojan Horse. Every society has done the Trojan Horse. Starfleet may not bring a lot of honor upon my House, but at least they aren't stupid enough to think up a plan that everyone and their grandma has heard about," stated Na'tor. He was so upset he had flipped his glasses up on his brow ridge and wasn't even trying to render words into semblance of poetry.

"The acid in the stomach will punch holes through the hull!" exclaimed Goth, her concern predictably not for people, but equipment. "Do you know how much a decent hull refit costs now a'days, not to mention how long the waiting list is?"

Dr. Evans was shaking his head back and forth, mirrored by his sock puppet. "That isn't good. I'm sure if our tactical officer was here, he'd have something to say. However, I discharged the lieutenant from sickbay to his room to finish recovering from the shocks he received in the Jeffries tubes a while back. No, not good at all, wouldn't you say, Ensign Mister Ible?" The puppet nodded in sage agreement.

Maxine began shouting loudly, "Calm down, calm down, everyone! Starfleet has indeed told me that we have to cooperate with whatever the Hive has cooked up. The admirals would not have agreed if it meant losing a ship and crew." An addendum thought of 'or, at least I hope not' jumped from brain to brain. There was hesitation as order was restored. "And I'm equally sure Captain here will have answers to all questions."

Captain surveyed the scene, assuring himself for the twenty-third time in the last several minutes that a transporter lock was securely focused on his position. "Your concerns will be addressed, although your fears are irrelevant, the product of smallness.

"First, the same polymer compound which was used to coat the runabout Honorable Mention 78 will be used to protect Secondprize from stomach acid. Cube manufacturing capacities will be sufficient." Just barely, Captain did not add. Some of the organic substance removed from the Dark corpse would be consumed by replicators to construct the polymer, insufficient carbon substrate in current storage.

"The explosive is a radiogenic substance activated by a specific radiation density achieved in the inner ring of the gas giant's Van Allen belts. Upon ignition, the substance atomizes; and when the activated compound subsequently makes contact with any solid surface, it will burn at a range of 3000 to 4000 Celsius. The semblance of fire in the Van Allen belts is caused by flash florescence associated with the ionization process."

Captain paused. The final concerns (damn this PC stuff) were more delicate. Delicate was not a Hive forte. Delicate usually meant using a point tactical nuclear device instead of one which would wipe out all life within a planet's hemisphere. In truth, the initial plan had not included an escape provision for the Secondprize, the tool discarded after use. Due to the infeasibility to employ remote control, it was required to have Secondprize and crew pilot the Dark from the inside. Unfortunately, in this new brave era of political correctness, Starfleet would only agree to allow Secondprize to be used as engines in the Trojan Dark on condition that there was a possibility of survival, or at least salvage of the ship for spare parts if the crew didn't survive. Starfleet did not wish to have to pull a perfectly functional ship from service to reload with the inevitable fools, idiots, and nonconformists which enlisted and which could not, for various reasons, be outright rejected.

The final frames of the plan were expanded, the picture zooming in to focus on the last five minutes. In the expanded view, a cloaked cube, easily overlooked, was visible shadowing the corpse as it dove into the planet's gravity well. The flash of an explosive blew a hole in the side of the body, relatively small, but more than sufficient to allow Secondprize egress. Suddenly the cube stooped, grappling the emergent starship with a tractor beam, both vessels subsequently retreating together with seconds to spare before the firestorm.

"You will be given means and time to escape. We will follow cloaked and facilitate your escape. It is simple. Cube #347 is repaired sufficiently to operate at full efficiency. As long as Secondprize crew is equally efficient, you will survive."

The senior crewmembers looked at each other, then at Maxine. Oh-oh.

"Well, um, okay," replied Maxine, attempting to hide her pensiveness behind the mask of a semi-competent captain. "Efficiency. Er, simple. My crew can do that. After all, we beat the crowd to the grand opening of the Museum of Obsolete Medical Equipment and Faulty Procedures, despite a little spatial anomaly trouble. Therefore, I'm sure we can, um, be efficient. I think. Now, about the Trojan Horse concern? Commander Na'tor did raise a serious point."

Captain had not answer. He did not question, could not, the direct orders of the Collective. In truth, the Trojan Horse scheme had been concocted because of the number of times it had been victoriously employed throughout the galaxy, the Greater Consciousness blindly missing the fact that each incident had occurred early in a species' history, prior to first contact and subsequent exchange of historical martial records. In each case, the Trojan Horse had been successful only once; and it might not have worked at all if a race was able to draw upon the past of more experienced species.

Why did the unassimilated ask such hard questions?

"Because. We are Hive. Resistance is futile." Captain activated the transporter beam and retreated to Cube #347 before more impossible questions were posed. Enough direct contact. Future "negotiations" would occur from the relative sanity of the cube.

The body of Eats-Too-Much wobbled into pseudolife. A long incision in the body wall, through which Secondprize had squeezed to reach the stomach, had been crudely camouflaged by drones first wielding very large sewing needles, followed by cardboard and staple guns, and finally many cans of black paint. Other cuts and holes on the corpse were similarly disguised, openings which had been conduits to replace organs and flesh with explosives.

At first the corpse drunkenly moved backwards. It paused for several long minutes as the Secondprize realigned herself in the stomach, matching her bow with the head end of the Dark. After a few abortive, jerky movements, the motion smoothed and the body turned insystem. Cube #347 cloaked to take up a flanking position several million kilometers distant. The Trojan Dark was on its reeling way.

Here ends Part III of Dark Rising: "Dark of Night." In Part IV, SEE the Trojan Dark explode! EXPERIENCE what transpires when the scheme is not quite successful! MARVEL as duct tape is used! WONDER if Secondprize and Cube #347 will remain intact! All this and MORE to come in the final part of Dark Rising!

