

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 4

Dark Before the Dawn

Recap -

By order of the Super Secret Society of Black Omega Obsidian Section 52 (and a Third) Death Committee (motto: "We are The Management"), the author is not allowed to attempt to condense previous parts of the story entitled "Dark Rising," nor humorize aforementioned summaries. If the reader is not able to retain memories related to the story, he or she should reread everything.

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Year: 2416, April (Old Terran Standard)

The Secondprize was a spider at the center of a complex web, or perhaps a fly stuck in a trap. Lying in the middle of a vast organic cavern, a stomach, lines radiated from the hull, anchored in flesh. Despite the enduring nature of the metal, an alloy unbreakable under normal conditions, a line would occasionally snap as corrosive acid atmosphere ate through the cable. In those cases, a runabout would emerge from the Secondprizes shuttle hanger and swiftly replace the broken line. The runabout, like the starship, was sheathed in a polymer protectorate, denying acid an opening. Unfortunately, not enough of the compound had been available to similarly coat the lines.

Inside Secondprize, the mood of the crew was much more that of fly than spider.

Troy watched his Ops console, then yelled, "A line! Starboard, front saucer quadrant." The ship shook as carefully balanced equilibrium was disrupted. "Can't you drive a little bit better, up there?" the lieutenant complained.

Zzzghatix hissed as he touched several controls at his station, smoothing the ride. Without bothering to look over his shoulder, the helmsman replied, "You try driving without being able to see. By the Hive Mother, I should come back there and tear out your gizzard, human." Bobble antennae jerked abruptly as Zzzghatix peered with great concentration at the viewscreen, a monitor which showed only the most hazy of impressions of surrounding space outside the Dark corpse in which the Secondprize was moored.

"Gentlemen, humans," Captain Maxine emphasized the second word, "we have to do this right. The /first/ time. 'Be efficient,' as the Hivers told us. I want to be able to go and see the Galaxy's Largest Disco Ball when this is all over." Maxine peered at the two lieutenants, both of whom stared at their respective consoles, seemingly absorbed in their work. "Fine, then. Bridge

to runabout, you hear where the break is, Lieutenant Letaf?"

A hiss-crackle was the reply. The primitive short-wave radio which the crew was forced to use in ship-to-ship communications, lest the living Dark outside hear, did not function well, again due to the corrosive stomach atmosphere.

"The Honorable Mention 78 has left the bay," said Troy in a tiny, inoffensive voice. "They are moving to the appropriate quadrant to affix a new cable."

"Good, good," replied Maxine. "Steady as she goes."

Zzzghatix stared at his console, deftly touching a triple set of buttons.

The Dark corpse listed to one side, then the other. The body swayed drunkenly, very unlike the sure confidence of a living Dark, jerking to a stop only to abruptly move forward once again. It was obvious even to one who had never seen a Dark that the movement was not that of a living being, but rather a marionette ill-used by an apprentice puppeteer.

Captain observed the Trojan Dark's halting progress toward the system's largest gas giant, whole eye unblinkingly fastened upon his viewscreen; and as Captain observed, so did Cube #347. The cube was cloaked, standing off at a distant flanking position, a silent watcher. Captain blinked, a mechanical motion, his mind much more focused within the dataspaces than on trivial bodily concerns such as a dried eyeball.

{The conclusion remains 56.2%,} stated Captain for the whole of the sub-collective consciousness as the consensus cascade ended, {that the corpse, and the Secondprize, will be destroyed by the Dark orbiting the target planet.} Pause. {Reinitiate scenario variant 3d. We must have better odds. Reminder. Root objective 1, modified - prepare system for Hive re-acquisition. Battle group enroute. Estimated time to arrival is 182 hours. Root objective 2 - assure Secondprize survival, either crew or intact records. The Federation must enter Dark war. Objectives in order of importance. We will comply.} Captain surfaced most of himself from the dataspaces, his role of primary consensus monitor and facilitator fulfilled for the moment. Part of himself remained, as always, to assist in the recalculation of scenario variant 3d.

Captain held out a hand, upon which a bottle of eyedrops materialized. Tipping back his head, he administered the liquid. A few gummy blinks later and eyeball was moistened.

"Pass the bottle," said a voice to Captain's right. "You could have at least waited until I was in my alcove before reinitiating of the scenario 2 series. I can't even close one of my eyes at the moment."

Captain passed Second the eyedrops. Indeed, of Second's two unaltered eyes (the remaining two long replaced with standard ocular implants), one was stuck in a half squint.

Second sighed and blinked, "Much better."

"Not like I had a choice over the timing of the consensus," rejoined Captain. He had not. The Collective had demanded re-evaluation of the scenario, as in right-now-if-not-sooner, using current analyses of the Secondprize's performance.

Second flipped the bottle in the air, sending it to replicator reclamation via transporter at the top of its arc. "Well, ta-ta. I'm back to my alcove while I have the chance. At least I wasn't the engineering team reinforcing the main spar when the Greater Consciousness made the demand. 75 of 230 will require a new hand; and 17 of 42 and 93 of 310 are still wrapped in vine." Second turned towards the walkway, then stopped just before exiting the nodal intersection. "So much for our root objectives."

Captain cocked his head as he watched the Dark corpse do a complete barrel roll. Volumes of unvoiced comments percolated on the intranet bulletin boards and in chat rooms. "So

much for Secondprize," agreed Captain.

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All but two of the breeding adult Dark of the pod orbited their feeding ground Jove, spaced equidistant from each other over the equator. The remaining pair, Mottle and Loremaster, flew a polar orbit above the gas planet which was destined to be the insystem home of the next generations of youth. The pod entire watched the incoming /thing/, the incoming shell of a daughter which used to be a living Dark.

The pod had flung inquiries at the daughter when first they sensed her limping silhouette wobbling insystem. The absence of answers had been the first inkling something was amiss. Her actions were not those of a Dark, at least not of one sane in mind and sound of body. Further Singing, additional scanning from afar for the state of the Dark's life signs showed conclusively the body incoming was exactly that - a body. The youngling lacked the echo, the spark, the electromagnetic field which was present in all Dark as long as they resided on the positive side of the life and death equation.

The question then became what animated the corpse of a pod-daughter? And what course of action should the breeding adults follow?

The greater Pod which was the Dark race had no tales of zombies, no superstitions of the undead. Dark culture did not include the concept of ghosts. War, however, was held in high esteem within the oral traditions of the Dark, the struggle to gain and hold territory and resources one of the major pivots around which heroic stories turned. Grand epics spanned back to the fuzzy time when the Dark race held a different form, a time when they went upon the surface of a rocky planet as easily as they now swam the vacuum currents. What there wasn't to know of war and tactics, of trickery and subterfuge, was very little.

The Dark knew of the Trojan Horse.

The actions of the youngling Dark were confusing, and with morbid curiosity the breeding adults allowed the corpse to approach. Discussion fluted between individuals. A metal box beast lurked in the territory, yet it was much too big to be hidden inside; and none of the cubes yet encountered by pods spread throughout the galaxy's arm was of a size to fit within. Additionally, the tactic did not fit that of the metal box beasts, who were loath to change strategies despite being repeatedly shown their futility. Active cooperation between cubes and other, smaller races of parasitized creatures did not occur to the highly xenophobic Dark.

Discussion flared into heated debate. The corpse wobbled nearer.

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"Gift shop to bridge. Gift shop to bridge. I have a problem!" called a frantic, young voice over the comm system. In an effort to increase self-reliance in times of trouble, Starfleet had installed gift shops in all ships five years ago, with Secondprize no exception. The reasoning behind the refit was based in the number of starships flung around the galaxy, caught in spatial anomalies, and basically traveling well beyond the boundaries of Federation space. The gift shops supposedly allowed self-sufficiency for the lost vessels, a place from which to sell humorous postcards, snowglobes, and pieces of advanced technology to strange alien cultures.

Maxine answered, "What?"

The voice was almost in tears. "All the...all the light-up Secondprize paperweights have

been broken. Nacelles and saucers are everywhere." The crewwoman in the gift shop completely broke down. "And all (sob) the...the replicator parts and (sob) phaser stock is (sob) smashed. And the (sniff) cute little postcards that say (sob) 'Got Milky Way?' are on...on...fire! And...and...and (sob)..." The sounds of crying sounded.

"Well, um, do what you can. Clean up. Put out the fire. We'll worry about it later," said Maxine uncomfortably. The sobbing stopped as the link was hastily closed.

The gift shop affair was only the latest in a series of incidents that had occurred as the Secondprize neared the target. Beyond the normal expected sparks and smoke, the stationary bicycles in the gym had lost their wheels, holodeck one was stuck in an endless loop of the tales of Anne of Green Gables, and, most irritating, the ship's councilor had escaped his closet confinement. It had taken hours of effort to hunt down the councilor, what-was-his-name, in the first place when he had been assigned to the ship; and now the process would begin all over again.

"Lieutenant Minimum, are the anchors holding?"

"Yes, sir," replied Troy as a console next to him artfully spat a waterfall of green sparks into the air. He turned around to disengage his station's special effects button.

"...And through the darkness the angels flew / bright of eye and keen of sword / winged vengeance stooped o'er the bloody seas / carrying in hand War's answer from their lord," chanted Na'tor. He paused, then pushed his sunglasses onto his forehead. "You know, that was actually quite good. Computer, store it."

"Stored," chirped the computer.

Maxine shifted in her chair. "Zzzghatix, are we close?"

"We began diving into the gas giant's gravity well three minutes ago," said Zzzghatix incredulously, "not that you can actually tell on the viewscreen, of course, with that hunk of flesh in the way. I told you at the time."

"That was when the commander was experimenting with adding a line of yodeling to his composition, wasn't it?"

The lifeless body dove into the mid-latitudes of the gas giant's southern hemisphere. Spiraling, all semblance of control was lost, sending the corpse into a nauseating tumble. Still too high to respond to the stabilizing effects of atmosphere, the Dark flipped head over tail at the same time it rolled first starboard before overcompensating to port. The living Dark were too far away to react as the corpse began its final plunge, hours spent in lively argument having distracted from the time required to move within effective weapons range. Such maneuvers did not seem warranted, however, for if the corpse had a Trojan Horse purpose, it seemed to have missed, instead now descending swiftly below adult orbits on a trajectory which could only end in the crushing, merciless grip of gravity.

Suddenly a line of fire blossomed along the forward segments of the corpse. The brilliant light died, revealing a dark slash bisecting deeply through layers of black epidermis and lighter colored flesh. Then, in a hideous birthing akin to that created over and over in the science-fiction movies of a myriad of races, a shape pushed itself from the body. Flesh partially digested from escaping stomach acids gleamed on plastic-slick surfaces. The Secondprize bullied free of her organic shell, trailing cables, in a frantic bid to throw herself free of the doomed corpse.

A different shape now appeared near the scene, a shape geometrical in form. Cube #347 discarded cloak as power was redirected to shields, engines, weapons, and tractor beam. No longer running silent, the cube snatched at its prize, latching on after only three attempts. Prize in

tow, Cube #347 distanced itself from the still tumbling Dark, accelerating laterally along the limb of the plant in a slingshot maneuver intended to fling the pair of ships away post-haste.

Screaming hatred, screeching disbelief that an enemy would invade the heart of their territory, the pod began to break orbit. Several members plotted courses which would come near, but not quite intersecting, the escape path of the cube. Other individuals dove into the gravity well of their feeding grounds, beginning their own slingshot vectors. More distantly, Mottle and Loremaster, trailed by the excited adolescent Burr, plotted intersections of their own. None paid attention to the husk which was falling deeper into the gas giant.

A critical point was reached, radiation density tripping the critical level. The substance packing much of the inside of the corpse reacted with the radiation, exploding with an intense white light. Deeper in the atmosphere, frozen cloud tops of red, white, and dirty orange rolled, shock waves speeding outward from ground zero in a concentric pattern. Much higher, the visible phenomenon was that of a raging firestorm, spreading outward in a tsunami wave of flame. The Dark could not move fast enough, the physics required to break orbit and flee too much to overcome. Where flames touched immense black bodies, pyres of violet erupted. Soon twenty bonfires blazed with stellar fury.

Mottle and Loremaster screamed with sympathetic pain and fury, echoed by younglings in the Oort cloud, long after the Jovian feeding grounds had claimed the cinders of what had used to be a pod of breeding adult Dark.

Cube #347 and Secondprize escaped with nary a melted hull plate. The beings onboard both ships were oblivious of the meaning hidden in the massive static disruption all up and down the conventional radio frequencies.

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Sensors twitched as she stood in her alcove. High on her neck, just below the joint to head, were four tympanum. The same color as her exoskeleton and essentially invisible if one did not know where to look, the thin membranes were the ears of Sensors' species. It was toward these organs the jerky, abortive motions targeted, hands and forearms motioning up to protect her ears, only to quickly pull away again. Yet, the local ambient noise was at the usual volume. Outside was a different matter.

{Noisy, noisy, noisy!} complained Sensors as she began to rock side to side, carapace clanging against the sides of her upside-down tub of an alcove. To any other drone who listened to the grid feed Sensors' complained of, the only sound was a static hiss like crickets in a rainstorm. The experience was annoying, but not painful, and certainly did not evoke the anguished mindset the insectoid was broadcasting. Normally the sensor hierarchy would filter the parts of the electromagnetic spectrum which did not add to the cube's sense of the surrounding universe, but in this case, at least for Sensors, the radio frequencies were an irritant which could not be blithely dismissed. {Noisy! Random noise with [stapler]! Noisy, noisy, noisy!}

{Sensory hierarchy,} said Captain, once again, {scan the Secondprize.}

Wailed Sensors, {It is so noisy!}

{Sensors, attend. Collective dictate of our sub-collective structure or no Collective dictate, you will be replaced if you continue to show malfunction.} To be replaced was tantamount to failure; and the label of failure was a situation Hive drones actively strove to avoid, even when success meant termination. Most drones on Cube #347 were apathetic about

the whole failure/success thing, disappointment of the Greater Consciousness immaterial when one was imperfectly assimilated, which in itself was an intrinsic failure. Sensors, on the other hand, was extremely susceptible to the threat of failure, her racial notion of assimilation the equivalent of bodily ascending to heaven. One doesn't, after all, disappoint heaven.

{Sensors will [table]. Noise. Scanning.} The required information flooded the dataspace. As appropriate subcomponents of sensory hierarchy and command and control digested the data into useful packets, Sensors returned to her bemoaning.

With a flick of his mind, Captain hailed the Federation vessel Cube #347 was tractoring. Scans showed it to be none-the-worse for wear, still festooned with the cables which had anchored it in the middle of the Dark's gut and covered with the vacuum dried remains of gore underlain by slick polymer, but quite functional. Minor problems did remain, primarily associated with the Oort cloud Dark encounter, but also attributable to inefficiencies expected from a nonHive crew.

In comparison, Cube #347 looked as if it had been hit by a cosmic fleet of Mac trucks. The hole in subsection 8 was covered, mismatched hull plates blending well with the patchwork quality of surrounding subsections; and the warp nacelle subsegment was newly repaired despite interference of a vegetative nature. Under the thin metal surface veneer, however, Cube #347 lacked much of its complex hull architecture, missing layers of ablative armor, shock struts, and thick slabs of tritanium. Eventually the crater would be filled and defense along the compromised edge made sound again - cubes had suffered much greater insult - but until then, it would be a soft spot. Thorny was not assisting engineering crews, although the plant appeared to have largely retreated from vacuum areas, likely concentrating its resources to grow in places sure to irk Delta now that it had escaped subsection 8 confinement. Concerning the compromised main strut, removal of the bloodvine was not recommended until a major Hive shipyard could be reached.

The Secondprize finally deigned to respond to the hail. Captain debated which protocol to send on the visual channel - catwalk cam or his own visage. As the communication fell under the category of formal, he decided upon catwalk with Multivoice verbal. Psychologically, it dwarfed the average humanoid, made those unassimilated feel how truly small they were in the presence of manyness. It also served to diffuse the ire of the recipient when there was no single target to focus upon, even when said target was as much an image of the faceless Whole as a view of suspended walkways.

"We are Hive," opened the sub-collective. Captain watched the return feed from his nodal intersection, mouthing the words.

Maxine tried to stand from her command chair, failing. Sheepishly she unbuckled a seatbelt, then rose to her feet. Her response to the sub-collective's civil greeting was verbal attack. Elements of the sub-collective placed a high probability that the Starfleet captain was attempting to cover her personal faux pas. "My chief engineer is very unhappy, to put it mildly."

"You are functioning at 87% capacity. Due to the lack of crew competence, your full rating is 93%."

"Don't give me that. My ship is a mess. At the very least, I've /crap/ of the literal sort frozen to my hull." Maxine stalked forward toward the camera pickup, gesturing wildly.

"Cosmetic appearance is irrelevant. The plan was a failure. Twenty adult Dark were dispatched. Two remain."

"Failure?" squawked Maxine, her voice rising. "We set the whole planet on fire!"

"You exhibit gross hyperbole. Two adult Dark remain. Our course is the innermost planet

of this system. You will be towed there."

Muttered Maxine, "Like we have a choice." At the same time, the background showed a nameless crewman scratching his head over the word 'hyperbole,' then turning to the lieutenant at Ops for a detailed definition. Maxine spoke louder, drowning the conversation behind her, "And why, might this insignificant mote of a Starfleet captain ask, are we going there?"

"A meeting will convene on Secondprize at your local time 1300 hours, six hours hence. We will send a representative at that time."

"No! I want answers..."

Captain severed communications, then set the system to reject all calls from the Secondprize. The impatient Starfleeters would try to re-establish a link in order to ask irrelevant questions (99.95% probability, whispered a drone partition dedicated to computing useless odds and compiling meaningless statistics). All would be explained in time, and until then, the cube's only response would be a pre-recorded directive for all callers to leave name, number, and a short message. Meanwhile, he, the designated representative, required regeneration.

{Noisy. Very noisy.}

At least his body would be rejuvenated. His mind, on the other hand, would not be receiving rest. Such was the absolute joy of being primary consensus monitor and facilitator.

The Secondprize briefing room. Again. Captain peered at the calm peach walls, then at the floor covered with a plain carpet of an indistinguishable color which went with everything and was guaranteed never to be rid of coffee stains, no matter how much scrubbing was employed. The only bright point of the room was the viewscreen. As a connoisseur of monitors, Captain knew the generic brand Starfleet used in ship construction wasn't the best, nor were the maintenance replacements much better, but it was large and the colors fairly sharp. For a moment, just a moment, Captain allowed the fantasies of the increasingly despondent assimilation hierarchy to color his thoughts, to see what the walls, the floor, the humanoid occupants (except Lieutenant Letaf, whom had yet to be present at a staff meeting) might look like Borgified. Censor programs quickly stepped in, reminding the sub-collective that the Hive only accepted volunteers, and that the Secondprize crew had not done so despite the attractive recruitment offers sent to their Fednet e-mail boxes. Regretfully, Captain erased the vision, turning his attention to Maxine.

Maxine appeared somewhat nervous, although confidence was returning quickly. She swallowed, then asked, "You, um, there? It looked like, for a moment, you weren't quite there, or there were too many of you there, or that we were something disgusting and needed to be stepped on. You know what I mean? Er, um," ended the Secondprize captain. Captain did not reply. After a few beats, Maxine clapped her hands together and said, "Well, now that everything is cleared up, on to business. First question: when do we get out of here?"

"'We' will not be leaving," replied Captain, including Secondprize in the collective We. "Two adult Dark remain in this system. We shall observe them, as shall you, as Starfleet has ordered. The Hive insists upon your continued presence as observers, and We will insist to the point of disabling your warp drive. We will leave together once all adult Dark in this system have been observed."

The silence from the Secondprize command crew was thick. "You know," said Goth, breaking the silence, "I think I liked the Hive better when it was Borg. At least then, or so I've heard, there was no sarcasm."

Troy remarked, "I've been told in the Nigarian system that there is this Hive cabaret..."

The lieutenant stopped, looking around with wide eyes. "What? What did I say?"

Zzzghatix snorted. "For being so smart, you are awfully dumb at times, Mister I-am-a-genius."

Troy continued to look perplexed.

"Say," interjected Goth, "maybe you'd like to visit my next engineering pizza party. I think I could cure you." The engineering chief glared down at the PADD she was holding, of which Captain could see only a glimpse of a video feed. She frowned. "Just a moment." Several buttons were pushed. "Much better. As I was saying, I'm sure a little pizza would cure you. It has done wonders for the efficiency of my department."

Maxine said, "That is something I've been meaning to talk to you about. However, it will wait. So, Hiver, what, exactly, will we be 'observing.' And if it has /anything/ to do with Dark corpses, you can disable us as much as you like, but we will not be participating." Zzzghatix empathically seconded his commander, tacking on a rude comment about the turning radius of a dead Dark.

Captain mentally crossed out Plan #1, which had indeed included another Trojan Dark. Weapons, however, had many, many scenarios to choose from, and Captain loaded the next from the list into working memory. Captain began: "This is what will occur: we..."

"Wait a minute, Hiver-o," interrupted Na'tor, who up until this point had been more or less silent except for a quiet rhythm on his bongos, "why should us cool cats follow any Hive plan? You don't exactly place whole of limb high on your priority scale, you dig?" The Klingon pointedly indicated Captain's heavily cyberized left side. "I believe us who do wish to remain intact rap out our own scheme."

Maxine nodded, slapping the table with an open hand, "Yes! That is what we will do. For instance, why couldn't you Hivers take your ship, cloak it, then sneak up on them and fill them full of torpedoes? No need to include us Secondprize observers at all."

A green transporter beam shimmered into existence. "Hive transporter signature detected," announced the Secondprize computer belatedly. A drone materialized.

Captain retreated to the side of the room. "You may refer to this drone by the designation 45 of 300, else Weapons. He functions as our tactical coordinator. The personality of Weapons is...unstable. We request you do not provoke him, for he is a tactical unit, and as such permanently retains an installed suite of active personal disrupter small arms." Weapons' thoughts as he surveyed the room was of the best way to disable and/or terminate all personnel present should they sneeze or make any other threatening move. Captain modulated those thoughts, berating Weapons to behave himself.

Weapons slammed a fist on the table in imitation of Captain Maxine. A dent dimpled the top. "Your plan is commendable, but unacceptable. The modified Type 18 cloak is not sufficiently reliable to utilize in such a fashion, especially as the Dark targets will be aware of our ability to cloak and actively scanning near-body space. There is a 67.2% chance of failure to dispatch both adult Dark, if they were alone. We have detected them to be accompanied by a third Dark, likely sub-adult, which in turn increases chance of failure to 75.5%. Your scheme is rejected." Weapons spoke at full shout, as if he were vocally addressing drones on the far side of a bulk cargo hold. In fact, the option was one highly favored by Weapons, closely following a straight charge without cloak, but both plans had already been vetoed by the greater sub-collective.

{Less volume,} reprimanded Captain, {else you will render the Starfleeters deaf. Remember, they do not have aural volume control.} Weapons sullenly acknowledged.

Maxine rubbed her ears. "Well, something else, then. Goth, what about an engineering trick?"

"Why don't we just blow up the sun while we are at it?" muttered Goth. She silenced herself while she thought. "You could open up a conduit right on top of them. That would surely ruin anyone's day. Or how about lay a mine field, then lead the Dark into it?"

Weapons answered, "Our objective includes retaining this system intact, thus, we are not allowed to detonate this star."

"Hey, hey, hey," said Goth, raising her hands. Her expression changed to incredulity masking a hint of fear as she registered Weapons' words. "I wasn't actually suggesting...wait a minute, you mean you can blow up suns?"

"Yes. Given sufficient preparation, we can induce stars of yellow dwarf classification and heavier to nova. Number two, regarding transwarp conduit: such an action would require pinpoint accuracy, of which is highly unlikely for various reasons. Unless all three Dark are within ten meters of each other, only one enemy will be dispatched in such a manner. Number three, regarding the mine field: insufficient time and resources are available to this sub-collective to create a field of adequate size and density, assuming the enemy was blind to our preparations. Starfleet crew, do you not think we have examined all options conceivably available to us?" Weapons, in fact, liked all the suggestions, especially the exploding star, and it rankled to have already been forced to discard them as viable given the situation and Collective constraints.

The brainstorm session continued, consuming valuable time as Weapons shot down each increasingly outrageous suggestion. Among the proposals were the standard Starfleet why-don't-we-talk-it-to-death-or-at-least-until-it-agrees-to-play-nice gambit, confusing the Dark by blinding their senses, and inducing them to eat a shuttlecraft stuffed with explosives. Finally Troy asked, "Well, what about electricity, like before when we were caught?"

"We are glad you suggested thus," said Captain as he stepped away from the wall where he had been quietly waiting, "for we have a plan which is based upon that incident."

Weapons gave a ghastly smirk as he strode to the viewscreen, hitting the wall beside the monitor with excessive force. He linked the sub-collective to the room's audio-visual system.

Maxine queried, "Electricity was a key element of your original suggestion, wasn't it?"

Captain did not reply. Instead he nonvocally bade Weapons to display the plan schematic on the screen. The lights of the briefing room dimmed.

A large ring, the base of a harness, appeared on the viewscreen. Trailing from it were a dozen cables, each ten kilometers in length. As the picture pulled back to include a stylized Secondprize, silver Hive alphanumerics flashed onscreen to detail attributes such as size, alloy properties, and, most importantly, conductivity. The harness floated to ring the Secondprize's stern fuselage, then was attached with a series of explosive bolts. Further forward on the hull a pair of power plants sprouted, again anointed with Hive writing. It was a good thing the Starfleeters could not read Hive script, else the knowledge that each plant was the equivalent of one of Cube #347's auxiliary cores would surely have been reflected on their faces. The cores were mounted on a pallet, which, again, was attached to the hull using explosive bolts. The cores, in turn, were wired to the harness. With Secondprize dressed up, the scene pulled back to show three Dark, a nebulous cloud of material, and Cube #347.

Weapons tapped the display. "This ship will be modified to the shown configuration. Harness and cables will be electrified by the two cores, but the vessel itself will be insulated." Weapons paused, and Captain knew the former was disappointed that insulation had to be included in the design. "Cube #347 will deploy a cloud of high conductance material with an

approximate spherical volume of 785,000 kilometers cubed. The material will be deployed in the orbit between the second and third planets. Secondprize will lead the Dark through the cloud; and when at a point whereupon the Dark are enveloped with Secondprize outside and the cables still trailing inside, the power plants will be activated, followed by their ejection along with the harness. The electrification of the cloud should be sufficient to terminate the Dark."

The scene ended with a graphic computer simulation of charring Dark.

"Should?" asked Maxine. She ignored Troy's gagging sounds.

Captain said, "We are Hive. We are thorough. We have constructed a contingency plan to allay your small concerns." He told Weapons to upload the backup plan. Weapons complied, eager because this one included much which satisfied his violent urges.

"There is a 10.7% chance one Dark will not be terminated," began Weapons, "in which case Secondprize will rendezvous with us at coordinates we will provide your computer. We will be waiting, cloaked. As you near, we will remove you to a new vector via tractor beam. Following this action, we will open a transwarp conduit and pull the Dark into it. When we are inside, but the Dark only part way, we will collapse the opening."

The viewscreen now showed Secondprize running frantically ahead of a pissed off Dark. Right as it appeared the Starfleet vessel would be captured by reaching arms, it flew sideways, out of harm. Simultaneously, Cube #347 decloaked and effortlessly led the Dark into the aforementioned transwarp conduit. The picture ended with the Dark sliced cleanly, and mortally, in half. A dark blob of blood impacted the hypothetical camera, turning the scene distinctly red. Troy urked, stood up, and ran from the briefing room.

"The Dark will be terminated! Dead! Deceased! Destroyed! Boom!" shouted Weapons. The viewscreen altered to show Cube #347 returning from transwarp space to shoot the corpse with torpedoes, followed by radical dissection of the resultant bits with cutting beams. "We will make sure it will remain that way! Can't be too sure! Kill! Kill! Kill!" Weapons continued to rave, even as Captain calmly directed a cube transporter beam to return the drone to his alcove, preferably before he began to foam at the mouth. {Doctor, see to Weapons' sedation,} he ordered to the intranets. Bright lights returned to the room.

"Questions?" asked Captain to his stunned audience.

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Paradoxically, it was cooler near the surface of the star than in the middle and outer fringes of the solar corona. Still, a star was a star, was a great globe of hydrogen and helium plasma fusing to heavier elements; and except for those rare machines and beings made or bred for the environment, it was lethal to all whom dared to brave the extreme temperatures and radiation for too long a time. Mottle and her two companions were not exceptions to the rule, each longing for the frigid, near absolute zero vacuum their bodies had been genetically engineered to crave.

Extreme environments called for extreme precautions. The hide of each Dark was enshrouded in a highly reflective metallic polymer. Rippling like quicksilver along immense flanks, the substance was produced by specialized subdermal glands, then sweat onto the surface. In addition to reflecting enough heat to allow uncomfortable existence, the polymer dulled many types of active scanning systems. On the down side, production of the material was metabolically expensive because continued evaporation meant continued resupply; and additionally, one could not exude arms when so encased, could not eat, had curtailed mobility, and muffled senses. For

the most part, negatives vastly outweighed benefits, and directions to make the polymer were normally retained in the inactive state of safe storage in a DNA plasmid ring within library cells.

The senses Mottle possessed were tightly focused on a point far "above" her. Although the sheer amount and intensity of solar particles and briskly snapping stellar wind distorted her perceptions, she was still able to find the innermost planet of the system, and, more importantly, taste the metallic signature of the metal box beast. The little parasitized gnat was also likely present, but unresolvable. As she observed her targets, she simultaneously took soundings of her position and automatically estimated time to arrival.

Carefully, Mottle squirted a tight-beamed microburst radio communication to her companions Loremaster and Burr. Radio was a dull, one-dimensional form of communication, but it was the also quickly lost amid the background electromagnetic noise of the star, masking their location. ::We will separate into pre-attack positions in an eighth orbit. Prepare. Do not reply.: Burr, without adult weaponry, would serve solely to draw fire unless he could close near enough to physically attack. He knew and accepted the risk as that which came with emergency and approaching maturity.

Silver hide rippled, reflecting swirling plasma. The star was hot, but it could never burn with the same intensity for vengeance, for defense of territory, which simmered in Mottle's hearts, in her soul.

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A small light glowed a violet counterpoint to the standard subdued ambiance of a Hive vessel, combining with plasma green highlights to create a hideously nauseating color. The lamp in question was small, of a size to use while reading in bed, or perhaps to peer into dark, forbidden corners. The peculiar hue it emitted was specific to the type of ultraviolet bulb used the multiverses around: wherever creatures who could tan gathered, beauty and tanning salons followed.

This particular lamp appeared to be forgotten, perched as it was on the casing of a transwarp coil. A plug attached it to an overly long extension cord, which in turn snaked across the deck until it disappeared into the local primary power distribution node, spliced to the cube's energy grid. It was not an appliance one would expect to find among the Hive, the drones of which sported partially necrotic epidermis and could not physiologically tan. Cube #347, however, was nothing if not thorough in its collection of misfits and walking neuroses; and the fact 157 of 310 was determined to blast himself with ever-increasing doses of ultraviolet radiation until his skin lost its pasty hue was not unexpected. Unfortunately, 157 of 310 had been called away in the middle of his most recent tanning session to replace 107 of 310 in a task after the latter had accidentally electrocuted herself. The urgency of the order outweighed his normal routine to carefully stow the lamp when he was done using it.

At one corner of Transwarp Core Room #4, a metal plate popped off the wall, falling to the ground with a loud, echoing clatter. Within the interstitial space was darkness, which quickly resolved to the shadowed and deliberate movement of a gray and green vine. One tendril, then a second, curled into the air - a stop motion film documenting plant growth set on fast forward. Another, thicker vine, pushed into the open, supporting several large leaves. The leaves quickly orientated themselves to allow as much ultraviolet light as possible to strike their broad surfaces.

Thorny could survive quite well without light. Liberal clandestine application of fertilizer from Doctor helped, but was not necessary. Still, Thorny did have a craving for natural

illumination, even when said illumination was a small tanning bulb. More of the bloodvine pushed itself into Transwarp Core Room #4. Soon the entire bulkhead was a solid wall of green and silver; and then the room was filled.

Leaves rustled without benefit of a breeze.

* * * * *

Goth watched the monitors as Secondprize's hull was modified, or so the operation was impassively described by the Hive. She personally preferred the word mangled, possibly mutilated. True, the Secondprize was not perfect to begin with, especially regarding the wrongly installed nacelles, but the ship was her charge, and one could not fault her for feeling protective. While most of the exterior work was being completed by drones because they could function in vacuum unencumbered by bulky suits, plenty of tasks remained inside to finish recovery from the idiotic Trojan Horse.

The chief engineer frowned as a discrepancy caught her attention. "Yeoman Spritz, stop and back up. I want a close-up at that harness spar you just passed." Three crewmen were on the hull with cameras, acting as observers.

"Yes, right away," responded the female voice associated with camera one. The scene slid sideways until it was focused on one of the connections between harness and ship. It took several long moments before Goth could determine what was bothering her.

"Good enough, yeoman. Back to work," said Goth. She did not bother to listen to the response, instead turning to bark at a drone located nearby, one of several inside the ship. Unlike last time, each drone had numerous escorts attached to him, her, or it. This particular one was Voth's responsibility. "Hiver! Delta! You forgot to insulate that spar! Are you trying to fry Secondprize?"

The drone had been staring at a point about an armspan in front of herself, focused on nothing Goth could see. Delta blinked several times before fully turning her attention to the impatiently waiting chief engineer. Goth may look exceedingly Vulcan-like, disregarding her orange skin and large ears, but her personality definitely ascribed to a full range of emotions, with impatience and annoyance highly developed, followed rather closely by greed when the circumstances were warranted. "We are assembling everything perfectly," rasped the drone, slight emphasis placed on the last word.

"Those drones out there are anything but perfect. I've seen at least one electrocution, a case of being bolted to the hull, discharge of an explosive bolt, and what seemed to me to be a tool fight with equipment flung between two teams."

Delta was calm. Of course, Hivers generally faced the universe with the same bland, dispassionate expression and monotone voice. "Unavoidable consequences of working in a hostile vacuum environment. Accidents do not detract from perfection."

"Accidents, sure," retorted Goth. She believed the answer about as far as she could throw one of the Hivers in a high gravity well. "And the missing insulation? I will not have a repeat of the earlier disaster, especially as those power plants being installed look a Director-damned sight larger than that little fusion job my crew found near the Bolian sanitary facilities."

Delta appeared to draw herself straighter with indignity, except such was not possible, least of all because the hardware in a drone's back and spine precluded slumping in the first place. "The Collective has knowledge of 12,721 sentient races, of which 12,609 had discovered the principles of electricity, including insulation. We retain information on 63,953 alloys,

ceramics, and natural products which have been used as electrical insulators, many more advanced than that employed by the Federation. The Hive does not make mistakes when confronted with simplistic wiring diagrams. You are mistaken. We have installed insulation in all appropriate locations."

Goth raised her hands in a warding gesture. "Okay, okay. That's what you claim. I'm keeping an eye on you, however. And I will be checking those spars, personally if I have too." And Goth would do as she threatened.

The Hiver stared at the chief engineer for several long seconds before returning attention to that volume of empty air in front of herself.

Another discrepancy captured Voth's observance, this time on camera three. "Ensign Tully, back up to that drone you just passed, the one who had his hand stuck to the hull."

Delta urged 229 of 230, {Unweld your hand from Secondprize's hull. Immediately. Cut off the limb if required.} Delta watched remotely through engineering drones in the vicinity as the human observer began to swing his camera around. A sensation of not-quite-pain rippled through the sub-collective as 229 of 230 wedged a welder between hull and palm. He hid his damaged hand as the camera pointed in his direction, then immediately beamed to Maintenance Bay #5 on Cube #347 for tendon replacement the moment the spying lens panned away.

An expression which included eyes narrowed in suspicion was directed by the chief engineer at Delta, body A, as camera three did not find what Goth had expected. Delta did not care: she was too busy reminding work teams to not wave at the camera nor make bunny ears behind unsuspecting companions. Simultaneously, Delta, body B, picked through a pile of twisted scrap with two dozen other drones on the planet below, searching for suitable harness components.

Prior to Dark occupation of the system, the planet - a low gravity, airless rock smaller than some of the larger moons circling gas giant primaries - had been used as an iron ore strip mine, as well as a junkyard and scrap supply depot. As the ore was of marginal quality, its primary function had been as a receptacle for nonfunctional fuel processing equipment and three terminally damaged cubes (accidental - two Cargo-class and one Exploratory-class) for future salvage. Although the resident Dark could have stripped the planet's surface of its valuable refined metals or broken the world itself into bite-sized bits, they had not done so, either content or more comfortable with the pickings at the system's Joves. Therefore, plenty of scrap remained in the junkyard to construct the harness. The problem was finding specific components which required a minimum of modification.

{No,} said Delta as she espied 131 of 230 trying to hide something in his torso carapace compartment, {We are not looking for,} she accessed the other drone's neural feeds, {ball bearings. Nor springs, nor fan belts. We require a cable of appropriate conductance with a length of at least ten kilometers. We require at least three more such cables to complete the harness. Does everyone hear me? A cable. Also, more insulators, or at least objects which look like insulators to appease the Secondprize humanoid engineering chief and stop her from questioning our competency.}

11 of 230 announced her discovery of a component to add to the power plants. After examining the object through 11 of 230's eyes and consulting with the resultant engineering consensus cascade concerning suitability of the metal disc, it was transported to the main assembly area on Secondprize's hull.

Sensors chirped a general announcement, paraphrasing the much more complex sensor

grid input (minus the portions which had been on subsection 8 and had yet to be repaired due to tasks of greater priority), {Dark [cherry] no longer [happy box] in view of sensors. Most likely trajectory [guess the magic quarter] is skimming the stellar surface in an equatorial orbit. It will be difficult for Sensors to [mantle] without [weeding] grid due to intense radiation. However, secondary extrapolation [dewdrop] possibility to rise out of [carpet] of elliptic, and utilize sensor shadow [bellied up] by primary.} Sensors accompanied her nearly incomprehensible narration with a jumbled impression of colored beachballs and pyramids flying amid a Limburger cheese background. As navigation and maneuvering the cube was not engineer's bailiwick except in exceedingly rare cases, Delta tuned out the information feed. However the Dark chose to attack, the outcome was clear: the Dark would arrive within a minimum estimated time of ten hours.

{Cables! Ten kilometers, not ten meters. 131 of 230, I saw that. I see everything. How many times must I say no ball bearings, not even small ones?}

Imagine an interested third-person party. It does not matter if the entity is Director, Critic, Q, or other omnipotent being. All which is important is a watching eye (or other sensory apparatus) able to keep track of many movements in the shell game to come.

Deep in the star's corona, nearly at the turbulent point superheated stellar atmosphere merges with percolating plasma, three Dark shapes swum. A shimmering silver quasi-organic coating, continually exuded from pores to replenish that evaporated by heat, kept the extreme temperatures at bay. The sweat was hideously expensive metabolically and resource-wise, but it could and did offer protection for the star, as well as camouflage them from peering sensors. The youngest Dark of the trio struggled to maintain pace and coating, to prove he was a worthy addition to the family-pod even through burgeoning hormones had yet to initiate offensive weapon production. Silence was absolute, not a whisper of Song nor flaring of body electrical field to reveal the location of the lurkers.

At the innermost husk of the system's planets, actually the stripped core of a world utilized for unknown purposes by a race long forgotten in the mists of time, the Secondprize departed. Looking more like a fancy fishing lure than a starship, she sedately sailed, lazily trailing twelve cables. On both conventional and subspace radio the Secondprize noisily chatted, trying to pique the interest of the Dark known to be in shadowed wait nearby.

Moving outsystem at a much higher velocity, a cloaked Cube #347 swiftly traveled to a specific locale between the orbits of the second and third planets. Upon arrival the Dark had still not taken the Secondprize bait, although increasing disturbances in the star's deep corona indicated something appeared to be taking an interest. Hopefully it wasn't a precursor to a huge loop of plasma jumping over the solar surface or a radiation-rich flare. Either of the two phenomenon had the potential of forcing the sub-collective to reconsider schemes which did not include the Secondprize, at least not as a functional ship. Cube #347 began to deploy the trap.

Dark, Secondprize, Cube #347, all were in motion. Perhaps it would be better for the hypothetical observer to have three eyes, one each for the participant groups, as well as a fourth to watch TV during the long, boring waits inherent in a space battle, and a fifth to read a book during commercial breaks. Of course, there were no hypothetical omnipotent beings present. They were all in the Milky Way satellite galaxy known as the Large Magellanic Cloud, watching the finals of the Q jhadball finals. It was undefeated Team Q versus three-time champion Team Q, and the Large Magellanic Cloud would never be the same.

Goth rolled a small sample of purported Hive insulation material between thumb and

forefinger. After Cube #347 had disappeared and Secondprize began to wander aimlessly around the system in a bid to be attacked by Dark, the chief engineer had ordered one of her crew to the hull to take samples of the blocks which were located on three of the spars linking harness to ship. The material had been surprisingly easy to cut, a small section slicing with the lightest touch of the handheld laser cutter borrowed from geological sciences. Once on board, Goth had found the substance to be white, exceedingly light when hefted, and easy to crush under pressure. It was an exotic piece of technology, like no other insulation material she had ever seen.

Finally giving up trying to personally determine what it was, Goth had shoved several samples into an analyzer, providing the computer with precise instructions to tell her when the examination was complete. Visions of promotion and reassignment danced in Voth's mind, the reward she would demand when she presented the new Hive insulation to Starfleet. If such recompense was not forthcoming, there were several companies she knew who would be avid to the point of murder to develop the product, providing her with a hefty royalty contract. If she could not transfer to an environment which did not have atrocities such as a Pakled cultural exchange program nor require intestinal goads for a modicum of ship-shape efficiency, then she would settle for being filthy rich. Five minutes later Goth had forgotten both dreams of grandeur and the material in the analyzer. A stern chase had begun.

"Faster, faster, faster," muttered Maxine in a litany grown familiar after several hours. The bridge monitor was horizontally sliced in two, the top portion showing real-time transmissions from a rear-view mounted camera and the lower section a computer schematic of the relative position of Secondprize, Dark, and the target cloud of conductive debris. The distances between the various parties was shrinking, and the question of the moment was if the Dark squares would reach the Secondprize triangle before the latter swept through the diffuse pink splotch. To complicate matters, as if that was possible, the distance between Dark and Secondprize upon entering the cloud had to be greater than capture distance, but less than the cloud's diameter of (hopefully) one hundred kilometers. Right now, the latter distance would not be a problem. However, not being caught and turned into Dark chow, that was going to be difficult.

Replied Zzzghatix, "Captain, begging your pardon, but we are going as fast as we can. The harness is interfering with the impulse field, slowing the ship."

The Secondprize rattled under a series of near-miss torpedoes. Such had occasionally plagued the chase since its inception, a half dozen potentially lethal charges exploding all around. It was, as Na'tor had poetically pointed out, like a game of cat and mouse. The Dark could obviously swat the Secondprize anytime they wanted; and while a Hive cube may be able to withstand the onslaught, as demonstrated by Cube #347, Secondprize would become little more than hot vapor and ragged chunks of metal. This round of the incomprehensible game was slightly different, however, for one torpedo exploded under the ship's belly, between the downthrust nacelles. Oh, wasn't it mentioned Secondprize was running without her defensive shields because of the immense complications caused, again, by the ten kilometer long harness?

"Engineering, report!" snapped Maxine. Bits of her hair which had escaped her bun during the previous volley were now wisping uncomfortably around her ears. The engines ominously stuttered for several heartaching seconds before throbbing back to full force amid fist-pounding by Zzzghatix on his console.

Maxine stood from her chair, gripping its back. The leather was scorched and torn, and smelt to boot. The engines missed another beat. In mechanical sympathy, sparks showered from the ceiling, followed by a tangle of optic wire. After ducking the technological rain, Maxine

heavily retook her chair. "Cube #347 - Captain: in the Directors' names, where are you? The ambush is toast, compromised, and we are besieged by Dark. Not even Zzzghatix's driving skills are going to get us out of this one." The internal communication system chimed, catching the Secondprize captain's attention.

"What?"

"Ship no go," was the hesitant voice.

"Nor, what are you doing on the intercom? Now is not the time for the lecture about touching things..."

"Lieutenant Commander Goth, she no go."

Maxine's eyes widened. "Is she dead?"

"No. Lieutenant Commander Goth no go. Legs no go. Mouth goes very good."

"Then do what the Lieutenant Commander says, Nor! I don't exactly have the time to talk to you."

Zzzghatix uttered an Andorian oath with his very human voice, "By the Hive Mother, another one is closing! I can't keep them off our nacelles. We will have to turn and die honorably!"

"No, Zzzghatix, keep driving. And your antennae have fallen off again." Max cleared her throat, then stared into the camera pick-up, "I don't know if your Hiver communication system is functional, or ours for that matter, but if you hear us Cube #347, get your collective a**es here!"

Predictably, there was no answer. "Tactical, report!"

At Ops, Troy responded, "Dark are getting closer, true, but at the same time, we are about to enter the field. Sensors are registering the cloud's presence now."

Maxine swiveled in her chair, motion shadowed by her second-in-command. "Lieutenant, I said tactical, not Ops. Oh, never mind." Na'tor silently pointed at the crumpled, bleeding form near the tactical station. "And where is Lieutenant Letaf? Don't tell me, I don't have the time. Just get medical up here to evacuate the ensign to sickbay, then inform the security chief the bridge needs someone to man the station. Oh, and check our replacement ensign and yeoman collection. I think we might be over our allowable allotment for the month." Maxine faced forward as Na'tor began barking the necessary orders.

"Entering cloud now," announced Troy.

Down in engineering, Goth was propped near a monitoring console. She refused to leave engineering, despite her condition: a good pair of lungs was the prime requirement for chief engineer, followed by whole of limb. Epidermal spinal blocks had taken care of the pain, allowing Goth to concentrate on the emergency. Engineering had taken a hit, but remained functional. In the pauses between profanity-laden orders, she switched betwixt active cameras, pictures on the console monitor ranging from an extreme close-up bridge view of the captain's nasal pores to an exterior shot of d**n near Dark which, except for the mottled one, were very difficult to pick out against the background of black space.

"Analysis complete. Analysis complete. Analysis complete. Analysis complete. Analysis complete," incessantly repeated the computer.

Goth didn't have the time for this. "Well, what is it?" she snarled, exotic Hive insulation the least of her concerns.

"Styrofoam." It almost seemed as if there was a note of pride to the computer's voice, of a job well done.

"Styrofoam?" squeaked a suddenly alert Goth. "As in the packing material? What type of insulation properties does it have?"

"Tactile shock protection, excellent. Thermal protection, good. Aqueous protection..."
 "Electrical!" interrupted Goth.
 "Electrical protection, poor."
 "Oh, sh**. The Hive knows all about the complexities of Volt, Amp, and Ohm, do they?
 Oh, sh**. Oh, sh**. Oh, sh**."

On the bridge -
 Zzzghatix shouted, "The Dark have caught us! We are stopped, and will begin to move backward no matter what I do!"
 "We are clear of the cloud," supplied Troy, "but the Dark at the end of the cables are still in it."
 "Then electrify the harness," said Maxine as she attempted to battle the fly-aways which threatened to make life even more miserable than it already was.
 "Aye," replied Troy as he touched the appropriate Big Red Button.
 In engineering -
 "Oh, sh**. Oh, sh**. Oh, sh**."

On the hull, relays flipped, allowing energy to flow between power plants and harness. The electrification went perfectly, even better than perfect because the leading Dark had managed to grasp a harness cable. Behind Secondprize, the field lain by Cube #347 flared a beautiful blue, excited ions radiating light. The Dark writhed.
 Something, unfortunately, was wrong. Several somethings to be exact. The lack of true insulation between starship hull and harness meant some electricity was shunted to Secondprize. As before, crew frantically jumped to find places of relative security, except for Dr. Evans, who was trying to find a place of perfect current flow in order to introduce himself and his sickbay patients to the joys of electroshock therapy. The power involved in this case was much greater than a mere mini-fusion plant, and systems reacted unfavorably, very unfavorably. To top off troubles, the Dark was somehow finding the strength to draw the Secondprize backwards, closer to the heart of the electrical ambush.
 Explosive bolts fired, severing harness and platform from Secondprize. Both floated backwards into the cloud, plants continuing to supply power. The Secondprize was free, for all that meant, free to float stunned, all systems crashed except automatic life support, basic gravity, and those little red lights that do not actually illuminate anything.
 Covered by the remains of a viciously exploded gel pack, Goth slumped against the base of the monitoring station, inanely giggling, "Zap! Ouch. Oh, sh**. Styrofoam. Zap! Oh, sh**." She knew she should be doing something to fix the problems sparking around her, but not just yet. She was allowed a moment of insanity, it was stated explicitly in her officers' commission contract; and anyone with even a fragment of Ferengi DNA was excellent at reading the small print. "Styrofoam."

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Mottle was in the lead of her pack. The parasitized gnat ship was right before her, the signature of its exhaust telling her it was straining as fast as it could in impulse. Mottle, however, could go slightly faster.

Heavy dust sleeted against Mottle's hide. She shot an arm forward at full extension, feeling the tip brush against one of the odd cables trailed by the gnat. Trumpeting success, she curled her tendril, catching the line. Simultaneously, she reversed thrust, feeling the strain on her

arm as a tug-of-war between herself and little ship commenced. Loremaster and Burr excitedly slowed to a smooth glide at her flank, reaching their own manipulatory limbs forward to assist reeling in the prize. Once the gnat was disposed they could hunt the metal box beast.

Suddenly the universe exploded into streamers of color, scents and smells and tactile senses crosswired. Microwaves painted a cacophony of minty tang tastes while the caress of dust on hide became the screams of x-ray binary pulsars. The vacuum surrounding Mottle and her compatriots had become hot, not the same as the stealthy trip through the primary's atmosphere, but rather the cold heat of electrical discharge. Within massive bodies, muscles rigidly spasmed, maneuvering gasses were voided to space, and internal bots of macro- and micrometer scale disrupted the very tissue they were supposed to protect.

Mottle warbled her distress into the subspace bands, hearing answering pain from Loremaster and Burr, as well as the more distant cries of children in the system's outer fringes. A trap! Stubbornly she hung onto the cable which conveyed the deadly electrical ambush, determined to drag the enemy to its death even as she died hers. The few functional senses on her body, the small analytical segment of herself not thrown into chaos, noted what she had so blithely dismissed as dust was in fact fine material with high conductance. Resolutely she tugged on her captured cable, felt as the gnat was slowly drawn backwards, then jerked suddenly as length of metal and a pair of energy sources whipped in her direction.

Harness and power plants struck her forward end, rebounding to tangle around the thrashing form of Loremaster. Burr no longer sounded his agony, not-quite-mature body systems unable to handle the extreme abuse. Similarly, Mottle felt the growing sparks of life within her wombs flicker silent.

Perhaps due to the sacrifice of her unborn younglings as additional insulation to vital internal organs, maybe because of her fractionally larger body able to disperse current over a larger volume, whatever the reason, Mottle clung to consciousness, to life. She managed to find enough control to force the last of her gas reserves through stiff thrusters, inching herself in the direction the gnat had slipped away. In less than six body lengths - so near! - Mottle found herself leaving the zone of electricity, shedding the conductive dust. Blurry senses stared in all directions, stunned mind requiring several minutes to realize the significance of the odd-shaped object resting stationary mere kilometers distant.

Five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen long minutes, the two opponents were still. Each licked her own worst wounds in a race to regain mobility first. Finally the parasitized gnat ship creaked into a limping impulse, vector clearly pointing outsystem towards escape. A minute later Mottle felt her own impulse systems responding, self-repair establishing a link between engines, power source, and caloric glands. First she would /crush/ the little insect creature, and then she would return to the dead bodies to mourn.

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The bridge turbolift doors opened, not with a crisp swoosh, but rather in a slow ratcheting motion. The elevators were one of many systems not working and not especially high on the priority fix list, effectively isolating the decks. However, someone appeared serious to enter. One hand appeared over the lip, then a second, and finally a body heaved itself onto the bridge. The person would have been provided assistance, except none could be spared from their respective stations. Puffing mightily, the human pushed himself to his feet, then stood swaying.

"Ensign Marcus reporting for duty," gasped the crewman. "I apologize, sir, but

Lieutenant Letaf is busy dealing with an incident in sickbay at the moment: Ensign Mister Ible has taken advantage of the chaos to take Dr. Evans hostage. Again. Lieutenant Letaf received your message and sent me up here to help out. So, where's tactical, what buttons do I push, and what the heck is that big thing on the viewscreen?"

"A close up of a targ butt," replied Maxine, not bothering to turn to see the ensign's entrance. She was too busy standing on her chair and trying to stuff optic cabling back into the ceiling.

Shocked, Marcus exclaimed, "Captain!"

Maxine snorted. "That is what it is. The difficulties crosswired the computer to show the 'Animals of the Galaxy' screensaver, at extreme magnification. So far, we've had a targ butt, a hippo tooth, and some sort of insect leg." A loop of cable fell out of the hole again, defying attempts to control it with duct tape.

Troy scrambled out from under his console, hitting his head as he did so. Dropping the wrench he was holding, he pushed a few buttons. Targ anatomy disappeared, replaced by a spectrally shifted view of the outside. "Mostly fixed," announced the lieutenant.

Na'tor unsteadily rose from his chair, sad remains of bongos clutched firmly in one hand. Grief was so great that while his sunglasses were askew on his forehead, he made no attempt to adjust them. "Tactical up here / push whatever buttons you like / nothing is going to happen / until engineering sets it right," he pitifully rhymed.

Maxine called, "And after you show the ensign tactical, head down into the ship and make sure everything is okay. Or at least still alive. Zzzghatix, we still ahead of the Dark and aimed at those coordinates?"

"That fitbutz will pay, it will. Flutzing Dark, double flutzing Hive," darkly muttered Zzzghatix. The final seconds before harness and power plant had jettisoned had seen one of Zzzghatix's precious antennae broken. The helmsman had quietly removed his headband, and now had it reverently placed close to his rapidly moving hands. The break had been partially fixed, but commandeering of the duct tape roll by Maxine had prevented total repair. "We ain't caught yet, are we? And the coordinates near, not that anything appears to be there."

The viewscreen showed little except purple and green grainy streaks which were supposed to be stars. No cube. No one wanted to see if a rear view camera was working; as it was, Troy was reporting sensors to show the Dark was less than twenty kilometers astern and gaining slowly. The situation was surreal.

"We are at the coordinates," announced Zzzghatix.

Nothing. Secondprize wasn't going to slow down or stop to search, not with the enraged being dogging their heels.

Suddenly a green beam appeared out of nowhere, narrowly missing Secondprize. A second attempt established a firm tractor lock. The Secondprize bridge crew was abruptly favored with the sight of a rapidly approaching cliff of metal as Cube #347 decloaked. The ship tumbled as it was passed to another beam, then flung away into the void.

A faint and very unKlingon wail echoed from the open turbolift doors.

Mottle screamed her rage and pain as she chased the insect of a parasite-infested metal creature. On the outskirts of the system, children too young to grow weapons worriedly formed defensive clumps and Sang scared inquiries for reassurance. Mottle did not have time to answer the younglings, her attention and effort centered on the gnat which remained just out of reach of her extended arms. In the back of her mind, she knew the small prey could likely escape her in

her crippled condition, and the fact that it didn't was not good. However, logic was not particularly important at the moment, not when the object of hatred was dodging yet another futile swipe of tentacle.

The twin sons inside Mottle were dead, a blessing and a curse in the categorization of injuries. She could always have more, but it was their sacrifice which may have contributed to her life as they had provided just enough insulation to her vital parts to allow her to reach the edge of the deadly cloud. Still, Mottle was injured. She could not travel faster than light; she could barely keep pace with the instigators to her wounding. Short-range weapons and other manipulation of energies were denied to Mottle, the crystalline lenses which studded her body shattered. The places within herself where her missile payload resided ached horribly, a symptom of malfunction. Senses exuded on a tendril for self-examination confirmed the inflamed or charred nature of her offensive payload bays. She was already healing herself, Mottle knew, but she could not expend the concentration necessary to direct her bots to those places she deemed most important. Mottle retained one weapon, her body, and she was determined to use it to punish her minuscule enemy.

Mottle's skin prickled as she felt the sweet-tart tang of a transwarp conduit opening directed in front. The flavor was familiar, was that of a metal box beast! Simultaneously, the tiny invader sped up, diving for the rip. The little ship suddenly veered, impossibly fast and at a sharper angle than inertia allowed. Mottle felt the gravitonic manipulation, heard the sizzle of artificially produced gravity waves. As the intruder cleared the conduit opening, traveling at speed on a different vector, a shape shimmered into view, uncloaked. It was the metal box beast.

Mottle focused on the new threat, a creature whose edge measured nearly three-quarter her own length. It was the same enemy who had slain Nurse; and it was the same enemy who had been present at the firestorm that had destroyed most of her pod's breeding adults. It was not a consequence it was here, at this place. It would die. Besides, Mottle would not be able to turn to continue pursuit of the little parasitized insect before she crashed into the much larger cube.

From afar came the Songs of an incoming pod, words muffled by the insulating properties of transwarp space. A nearby family, only forty light years distant, recently made strong by a new crop of breeding adults moving insystem from their childhood rearing grounds, had decided to act upon the weakness of Mottle's pod. With protection consisting of a single breeding adult, the system was considered available property, its resources open. Only the strong could hold territory; and a lone Mottle was not strong. Even if she would survive the metal box beast, she would be driven from the system, forced to hunt for a pod that would take her in. The pre-adult younglings would fare better, the conquerors adopting them into their own family.

The metal box beast appeared to hesitate, then slowly moved towards the blazing transwarp conduit opening. Not fast enough. Mottle grappled the cube, sending it into a spin as her mass contacted. She no longer cared if she lived or died, the news of an incoming pod causing waves of apathy concerning her survival. As long as the metal box beast was destroyed, what further happened to her did not matter. Tendrils felt a weakened part of metal hull. Arms began to rip at metal plates, either transferring the tidbits to her mouth or simply consigning them to space.

Cube #347 rolled under the onslaught of the Dark. A cluster of maneuvering thrusters fired randomly on face #5 as the enraged creature tore into subsection 8 and sheared control lines and reserve gasses bottles. Two decks beneath the hull complex, a conduit exploded as connections pulled apart by a blindly questing tendril thrust deeply into the partially healed scar.

The arm pulled back, grasping bits of greenery destined for gaping maw.

Captain fell against the back wall of his nodal intersection, then heavily met the floor. His viewscreen parted from its anchor, crashing down amid a shower of sparks, barely missing his head. Captain absently reached a hand upwards to claw upright, concentration focused on multiple threads - killing the roll; sub-collective coordination; turning off the ice machine in subsection 16, submatrix 6; determining how to complete the plan.

The plan had to be completed. The root objectives, the Greater Consciousness, demanded it.

Unfortunately, the strategy was not going according to plan.

Captain regained his feet, only to stumble forward and collide into the wall where his viewscreen had fallen, treading on it in the process. It was unimportant, not a mere top-of-the-line viewscreen when Cube #347 fought for its very existence. The scheme had begun to disintegrate at the initiation of transwarp, and fell completely apart when the Dark had smashed into the cube.

The coil in Transwarp Core Room #4 was malfunctioning: it would not disengage. A forgotten tanning lamp, a light hungry assimilated plant, the facts tumbled into place, telling an improbable story. However implausible, the outcome was known. Automatic diagnostic feedback from the computer had not been able to reveal the problem with the coil in Transwarp Core Room #4 until transwarp was initiated. The revelation by engineering hierarchy that a major propulsion problem existed caused a hesitancy as part of the sub-collective's processing power was diverted to consider options. That split second hesitation disrupted critical plan timing, allowing the Dark to make contact. Now, Cube #347 hung before a tear in subspace contemplating its possible actions even as weapons hierarchy members beamed to the surface of the ship in an attempt to delay a final fate which included digestion. Cube #347 was an ant mound trying to swarm a thick-skinned elephant.

Delta could not selectively turn off the affected coil, 157 of 310's unusual method of splicing his tanning lamp into the primary power distribution system had removed that option. Similarly, drones could not enter the Transwarp Core Room #4 due to the presence of Thorny, a plant more obstinate than usual as the Dark severely pruned it. Several coils were required by a ship the size of an Exploratory-class cube in order to adequately stabilize a conduit opening; and as long as one was on, all the necessary coils had to be engaged. One could hope the coil in the affected Transwarp Core Room might burn out, but the perversity of the universe guaranteed when a coil was not wanted, it would function perfectly for thousands of hours beyond its warranty.

Second came reeling into the nodal intersection, arms pinwheeling in a futile bid for balance. "Oops," said Captain as he bounced off a wall, deflecting his backup on a different trajectory out to the walkway. Captain thought he caught an {Oh, d**n. Engineering /had/ to begin banister maintenance now?} directed his way, but was not quite sure amid the other shouted conversations in the intranets. He was at mental capacity, and did not have the luxury to scroll back to check his memory buffer.

The conduit opening was becoming increasingly unstable. Cube #347 hovered at the dangerous threshold, balanced on the bitter edge between transwarp and normal universe. To retreat was unacceptable; to move forward was equally impossible. Neither path would kill the Dark ripping the cube apart. The only choice which remained was to do as the original plan mandated: to sunder the Dark in the jaws of a collapsing conduit entrance, even if it meant the destruction of Cube #347.

Cube #347 was only one cube among thousands, its drones the most minor (and irritating) of components. The Collective had no qualms about the sacrifice.

Delta cut power from all functioning cores simultaneously. Transwarp coils, starved of energy, immediately terminated the transwarp field. The conduit predictably responded.

Wires danced in Captain's nodal intersection, strobes of white light in an otherwise pitch black environment. He could no longer hear Second; he could no longer hear over a third of the sub-collective, their voices silent, absent, gone. No more dour Assimilation, no more pet crazy Doctor, no more of the many signatures grown familiar over decades.

In the fractions of a second which remained to the sub-collective - time enough to dwell upon the ending - Captain's thoughts meandered. No more sub-collective, true, but also no more inane assignments, no more baby-sitting duties, no more neurotic psychoses not of one's own making sharing space in one's mind. There was an upside to termination! {And no more d**n bloodvine!} interjected a distant voice, Delta intruding upon the final almost-solitary moments of self-contemplation Captain was allowed.

Time sped up, stretched fractions of time returning to the pace the rest of the universe followed. The conduit failed, crushing Dark, crushing cube, neither of which could withstand the terrible force of collapsing realities. The last thing the connected mentalities of the Cube #347 sub-collective saw was a bright light. It was not the end of the tunnel, or even a mischievous Q waving a flashlight, but the headlight of an oncoming train.

Maxine pumped a fist over her head, letting out a whoop of glee. "All right! It worked! You hear that, Captain Bo, er, Hiver? The plan, mostly /my/ plan, worked!"

"Um, Captain Planck," said Markus from tactical, "the Hive cube isn't there anymore. I am only reading a debris field. Cube #347, they didn't make it." The ensign eeked as his tunic caught on fire from the sparking console next to his station.

Maxine immediately lost her jubilant mood. "Oh, bugger."

"Multiple transwarp signatures in the Oort cloud. They are Hive. I think the cavalry has arrived," reported Troy as he smoothly took over for the ensign rolling around on the deck trying to put himself out. "Whoops! Incoming right on top of us!"

"Oh, double bugger," said Maxine as she tightened her grip on the armrests of her chair. Secondprize bucked in the high energy wash of an open transwarp conduit as first one cube, then a second, rushed past. The large ships seemed not to have noticed the much smaller Federation vessel they had almost run over, else, more likely, the Collective did not deem the Secondprize's presence relevant enough to swerve. "Well," continued Maxine as the excitement died down, "I guess that is that. Could someone extinguish that ensign? Helm, set a course..."

Interrupted Troy, "Captain! More transwarp signatures! A lot more, and they are not Hive! I believe, yes, the computer is identifying the things as Dark!"

The Secondprize began lurching once more, this time as immense segmented cylindrical creatures with hide the color of midnight ebony emerged from tears in the fabric of space. Again, like the Hive cubes, the quartet of Dark which nearly plastered the Secondprize like a bug against a windshield either did not see the that of a Federation starship, or did not believe her important enough to warrant altering course. The previously flaming ensign stood up, the latest series of evasive maneuvers having rolled him into a fire extinguisher, which had subsequently discharged.

"And, triple bugger!" swore Maxine, hands waving in front of her face to disperse carbon dioxide foam. "Helm! Get us..."

One more time, Troy interjected, "Hive and Dark are attacking each other...and we are caught in the middle!"

The viewscreen, previously the sight of Cube #347's untimely demise, now showed a scene of distant fireballs punctuated by uncomfortably near torpedo and disrupter misses. Even though the ship was not targeted by either side, the concept of non-combatant was not in the vocabulary of either opponent. A cube zoomed past, pursued by five Dark; the sight was repeated several seconds later, only this time one Dark fled three cubes. Secondprize was smack in the middle of a war.

Maxine stared at the chaos outside. "Well, quadruple bugger."

Here ends Part IV of Dark Rising: "Dark Before the Dawn;" and wouldn't you just know, but there is an epilogue.