

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

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

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## **Dark Rising - Part 2**

### **Dark Descending**

Recap -

A short time in the future, in a galaxy oddly like our own except for a flagrant disregard of physics, a Federation starship by the name of Secondprize met a Hive Exploratory-class cube designated #347. After repairing technical difficulties that caused Cube #347 to fire upon Secondprize despite an agreement called the Commonwealth Treaty, Captain met captain Maxine and her command staff, some of whom were slightly odd and some of whom were highly disturbing. And disturbed. Meanwhile, on Cube #347, much hilarity ensues, centered around a toupee. Finally, Captain relates to Maxine and company that the Secondprize is about to act as an observer in a system overrun by a mysterious race called Dark. Away both parties go, Cube #347 towing Secondprize...

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Year: 2416, March (Old Terran Standard)

{Sensors says [yellow curls] are gone, again,} informed Sensors, head of the sensory hierarchy. Sensors, an insectoid with a faint resemblance to a praying mantis, tended to speak in third person and included among her vocabulary concepts and phrases not even the robust Hive universal translator could interpret. However, in this instance, to what 'yellow curls' referred was not a mystery.

Captain focused on Weapons, who currently had jurisdiction of tractor beams. {What happened? I thought you were certain we had determined a way to stop that blasted ship from escaping.}

Weapons snarled, {The Secondprize...adapted. If I was allowed to shear the nacelles from the fuselage, there would be no further problems. My hierarchy could also blow up engineering, just in case. And fuse all maneuvering thrusters. And destroy impulse.}

{No, that is not the point,} interrupted Second as Captain mentally indicated for his second-in-command to calm Weapons before he goaded his hierarchy into performing something destructive from which recovery would be difficult.

Captain sighed, then turned to contemplate the screen in the nodal intersection he frequented. As Cube #347 dropped from transwarp, sensors stretched to search for the wayward Secondprize, which in turn was echoed visually on the monitor. Maxine had pulled this annoying

Houdini act six times thus far, with this instance number seven. Somehow the Secondprize's captain managed to spur her otherwise incompetent crew to brilliantly break from the tractor beam and slip out of transwarp, all without damaging her ship, not even scratching the paint. It was a feat unmatched in Hive (and Borg) history, one which could not be prevented no matter how many tractor beams were used to anchor the Secondprize nor the securement protocol utilized. And why did Maxine insist on ruining Cube #347's precise timetable while at the same time provoking Weapons into a frenzy requiring severe actions to prevent the inadvertent "disabling" of the Starfleet vessel?

A tacky tourist attraction.

The worst part was, without knowing how Maxine knew of the attractions, most of which weren't on Hive astrometric charts, Cube #347 could not confidently plot a course to avoid the obstacles. Inevitably, something caught the attention of the tourist-mad Secondprize captain. The former eight day trek had mutated into a two week adventure in frustration.

{Find the Secondprize, Sensors,} ordered Captain. On his viewscreen, a red triangle began to slowly pulse. The point of view zoomed in until an unusual binary system filled the screen. Two enormous red giants circled each other, between which, improbably, sat a small rocky world with the characteristic signatures of life. The lifeforms in question were certainly not sentient, and therefore not of interest to the Collective, but life was present. Orbiting the planet was Secondprize.

Captain turned his attention to a small partition of command and control. They had been bestowed a very special task: to dig through the myriad of tourist publications to learn where Captain Maxine found her information. These out-of-the-way destinations were not common knowledge. {Report.}

140 of 480, spokesdrone, replied, {We have narrowed the search given the previous six visitation parameters, plus this seventh. This phenomenon is known as Fungus World, a planet tenanted by a globe-spanning fungus which has the properties of a trampoline. The only publication to mention Fungus World, in addition to the other six stops, is the guide book "Across the Milky Way on One Strip of Latinum a Day: 1,000,001 Hidden Destination Gems."}

The appropriate electronic book was provided by the partition to the general sub-collective to peruse. There were literally 1,000,001 destinations, including exact (or inexact, in the case of traveling phenomenon) stellar coordinates, local lodging options, and the nearest restaurants featuring cheap food edible by organic lifeforms. Sensors seized upon the coordinates, mapping all entries between the current position and the Dark target system. There were five potential layovers, five potential delays.

As Cube #347 exited transwarp and entered the Fungus World system to retrieve the wayward charge, a partition of command and control completed charting an acceptable course. No tourist destination would be passed within five light years, thus, hopefully, deterring the propensity of Secondprize to abscond. The update time estimate to Dark target system from the present position? Thirteen days.

Captain did not offer apologies, even insincere ones, to the Starfleet crew when they were informed as to the new course (apologies were irrelevant even in the new politically correct world the Hive operated), and neither did he chastise Weapons when Cube #347 tractored Secondprize using unnecessary roughness.

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It was not the Season of Breeding, and her sides were growing increasingly taunt with the twins that grew inside her, but Mottle nonetheless enjoyed the courting attentions of Loremaster. Loremaster was the smallest of the pod's four adult males, yet also the most loquacious. What he lacked in bulk, he more than made up by the quantity of knowledge he retained, and the ability to spin pleasing story, song, and poetry. He did not have a wandering itch, the need to visit pods and clan not of his birth, and so he could not truly be called Philosopher, Singer, or Poet, but still, his words were as sweet as any of the Honored clanless.

Mottle coquettishly led Loremaster through the Van Allan belts of the system's second gas giant, pretending to ignore his thrummings as they shivered her extended electrical field. Both knew the game for what it was. Mottle was surveying the suitability of the plant and its environs for the young adults which would be invading insystem in several seasons. The older breeding adults had claimed the prime feeding grounds and would defend it from their offspring until such time individuals proved their fitness to graze with their elders; and so it would be thus until the system was stripped, strongest family- and peer-pods holding the best territories. None had ever said boring tasks such as surveying could not be pleasant, however, and so Mottle enjoyed Loremaster's company.

More distantly followed a younger male named Burr, a reflection upon his woolly, growling voice-tone. He was recently insystem, the largest of the fruit from the first breeding season, drawn irresistibly to the metals and radioisotopes required to reach his full potential, materials scarce in the Oort cloud rearing grounds. Burr knew he was not ready to compete with his elders despite the fact he was two hundred meters longer than Loremaster. Stuck in awkward adolescence between growing youngling and breeding adult, he lurked at the edges of Mottle's family-pod, running from aggressive charges even as he absorbed the knowledge and customs he would need for entry into proper adult society.

Loremaster slowed as he felt the tentative thrumming Burr directed at Mottle, a juvenile parroting of the former's courting poems. Mottle chuckled in amusement at the youth's impertinence, continuing her assigned task even as she watched a semi-irked Loremaster mock charge the larger Burr. The adolescent would one day be a fine addition to the pod, but for now he was just an upstart child testing the limits of propriety, but also acknowledging his place in the greater clan-pod pecking order.

Mottle hoped her twins would be as bold some day when they were on the cusp of adulthood.

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Cube #347 and Secondprize arrived in system #258.1-H, a Hive fueling depot prior to the base's destruction by Dark. The Secondprize was firmly grasped by six tractor beams, each a slightly different frequency to prevent undesired straying of the small ship. Moments after exiting transwarp, after examining the immediate area for Dark danger, the tractors were cut, allowing Secondprize her freedom.

Both ships were purposefully lost in the system's Oort cloud, the vast spherical cloud of proto-comets which swarmed the outer reaches of all suns. The icy leftovers came in all shapes and sizes, from small buckshot to enormous planet-shattering mountains. Scanners received odd sensor ghosts which computers, silicon and organic, struggled to translate, frozen water and entombed trace elements foiling attempts to decipher surrounding space.

The observers had arrived.

Secondprize began to buzz like a hive of disturbed hornets when the computer announced fourteen unauthorized signatures had beamed into Cargo Hold One. Upon hearing the warning, Maxine's thoughts leapt to 'Borg or Hive, Commonwealth Treaty or no, so this is what it is like to become a "missing" ship statistic which the Collective professes to know nothing about.' Due to the continuing absence of her chief of security - he was supposedly somewhere in the Jefferies tubes writing an ode of groveling to his virtual girlfriend, the exact location undetermined since the computer, in a snit, refused to acknowledge his existence - Commander Na'tor had been sent to deal with the intruders in proper Klingon manner. He promised to create a bongo composition to commemorate the occasion. Fidgeting in his chair, Lieutenant Zzzghatix had been extremely disappointed not to have been allowed to tag along, muttering an assortment of disquieting Andorian and human curses under his breath.

"Get the cube on screen," ordered Maxine to Lieutenant Troy Minimin, "and start scanning them for any hint we are about to be blown into smithereens. Yeoman, um," Maxine glanced back at tactical, which was being manned by a young Vulcan woman whom she did not recognize, "tactical, raise shields."

"Aye, sir," said the Vulcan at the same moment Troy replied that the cube was returning the hail.

"What is the meaning of this?" asked Maxine immediately as the screen brightened. Unfortunately, the picture was of walkways with the infinity illusion video filter. "Give me a break. I want to talk to Captain Hiver about..."

Interrupted Troy, "A weapon is powering." The hull rang. "It glanced shields. No damage."

"A warning shot?" added the crewman at tactical unconfidently. Obviously it had never crossed her mind she might come fresh from recruiting to find herself on the bridge during a potential life-and-death situation.

"...er, I mean just plain Captain," hurriedly edited Maxine, "about the drones..."

The picture changed to that of a single Hiver. He was peering down, reading a hardcopy book, the spine of which was embossed with recognizable words, not Hive script: "Jumba the Wise Lizard Goes on a Tour of the Dungeon Dimensions." The book vanished in a green-hued transporter beam.

"You rang?" asked Captain.

Maxine dismissed the book. It must have been a hallucination brought upon by the stress of the situation. Hivers did not read, or at least did not read popular mystery. "You sent drones to Secondprize. Are you trying to assimilate us? 'Cause, if you are..."

Captain sighed. "We will not be assimilating you. One, the Collective only accepts volunteers. Two, even when we were Borg, this sub-collective was rarely allowed to assimilate a singleton, much less an entire ship. Three, if we were to assimilate you, you would already be speaking in plurals. Four, your crew is substandard and your technology known, so you would neither be adding biological nor technological distinctiveness to the Whole. I can go on, but I will not. Suffice to say, our purpose is not assimilation."

"Then why are drones aboard my ship?"

Captain's eyes unfocused as he tilted his head slightly sideways. After several heartbeats, his attention returned to matters which weren't internal. "Tell your Klingon second-in-command to stop firing phasers at us. We pre-adapted before we beamed over, therefore the gesture is futile. Additionally, tell him to stop the poetry recitation. Certain members of this sub-collective

are prone to...exaggerated acts of volatility. I will not explain, except to say we occasionally do not censor ourselves in a timely manner. The poetry has decent meter, but the images evoked are not serene."

Behind Maxine, the Vulcan, after a heated whispering argument with Troy, had managed to wrest tactical-related duties away from the overachieving genius lieutenant. "Weapons powering on the cube. Disengaging. Powering. Disengaging. They keep cycling, sir."

"Captain to Commander Na'tor," called Maxine, "whatever you are doing, desist!"

The open channel held the sound of phaser fire and heavy Klingon chanting, both of which sputtered to halt. Bongo drums. "Hey, da-de-o, what gives? My force and I, we were kicking butt, firing upon these drones, making them hurt a lot."

Troy protested from his station, "Butt doesn't rhyme with lot!"

"Shhhh," shushed Maxine. "Lieutenant Minimin, you can criticize the commander's poetry later, to his face. Commander, I'll explain later, but for now, leave the Hivers be."

Troy gulped.

Feeling control of the situation to almost be within grasp, Maxine tried asking again, "Why are there drones aboard my ship?"

Captain blinked his single eye. "Necessity. We /had/ planned to be in this system sixty-two days ago, but between your ship's tardy arrival to system #8460 and our detours to arrive here, we are behind schedule. The Collective dislikes being behind schedule. Therefore, Cube #347 must proceed insystem to begin reconnaissance. The original strategy was to delay several days a light year distant to upgrade your scanning and propulsion systems, as well as install a Type 18 cloaking device, with both ships subsequently proceeding together to perform this assignment. Some of the data gathered would be used to convince your bureaucracy to streamline full implementation of the Commonwealth Treaty, specifically, commitment of military forces against the Dark. Now, the cube is tasked to begin scouting immediately. We will return in fifty-three hours to retrieve transported drones. These drones will complete the required system modifications."

"And what will you be doing while I try to explain to my chief engineer why she should allow Hivers access to her precious systems?"

A suggestion of an amused grimace, a hint of knowing, an unidentifiable expression passed over the Hiver's face. "Among the transported drones are two by the designation 12 of 19. You may also refer to her as Delta. She is primary engineering node for Cube #347. We look forward to the discussions." Captain's mysterious comment was not explained. "Meanwhile, Cube #347 will be scouting this system for Dark. We, and you, will be counting young and adult, as well as inventorying current system depletions by the Dark. This, combined with data from the Collective's prior fueling depot, will allow extrapolation to resource exhaustion." Pause, then continuation with a voice more mechanical, more distant. "The endpoint is irrelevant. This sub-collective has been tasked; and dialogue is pointless. You will allow your systems to be modified."

"And if I don't?"

"The Dark are able to eat Battle-class Hive cubes. Secondprize would be an appetizer." A definite grin, a nasty baring of teeth, flashed on Captain's face before the picture blackened, cut by the cube.

"Cube #347 is moving away," said Troy before the Vulcan could open her mouth. "By golly, they just cloaked!"

The Collective was aware of 103 unique cloaking apparatus, from small gizmos which could bend light around pocket watch-sized objects to devices able to phase entire planets. The Hive additionally had working knowledge of 1832 variations upon the unique; and of those original 103, could reproduce 97 with varying degrees of success. The cube employed a modified Type 18, demonstrated to render the user (more or less) invisible to Dark. The modified Type 18 was a recent adaptation stabilizing the technology for use in vessels up to the size of an Exploratory-class; originally, two hundred years prior, it had graced a runabout, the smuggler owner of which had the bad luck to choose a Borg supply depot asteroid to hide from authorities.

The Collective did not normally employ cloaking devices. The Greater Consciousness had historically found a big cube, or a fleet of big cubes, bearing down upon a target to be much more intimidating and psychologically damaging than a whole lot of nothing. Therefore, except in extenuating circumstances such as the present, cloaks were not used.

Captain watched the Secondprize recede in his viewscreen. He would have liked to talk a little longer with Captain Planck, if only to unnerve and annoy her. The Greater Consciousness, however, had other ideas, and no drone could ignore a demand from the Whole.

Dipping deeply into the dataspace, Captain listened to engineering feeds. The cloak consumed a huge amount of power, requiring the initiation of two auxiliary cores, one to energize the cloak itself and the second to run machinery which dampened the extreme energy output signature of the cube. Although Delta was physically absent from the vessel, that did not preclude her normal degree of activity via the ever-present linkage of the vinculum. All systems were nominal.

Captain retreated to his Jumba book, opening a hand to accept it as it materialized from the transporter beam. Already preliminary scans were streaming through his head, but it would be several hours before the vessel would arrive to the first formal survey point, to start scouting in earnest. So far, the Dark in the system, those which had thus far been identified, were unresponsive, unaware their territory had been invaded. The Federation crew had never been under Dark attack, never been literally consumed, at least not in the way any living drone could experience an assault, accessing direct neural feeds and archived memory engrams; and Captain strongly desired, as much as any drone of the Collective was allowed to desire, not to become yet another of the hundreds of thousands of Hivers (and Borg) now "alive" only as echoes recounting their final moments staring down the maw of a Dark.

Jumba the Wise Lizard's fictional tribulations were much preferable.

Maxine was firm, "You will allow the drones to do what they have to do."

Goth peered over Maxine's shoulder for several long, silent moments, examining the fourteen drones standing absolutely still in the middle of the cargo hold. Two of the assembled Hivers were exact replicas of each other. Her eyes narrowed. "Secondprize's systems are my systems. Over my dead body."

"Lieutenant Goth," reprimanded Maxine, "you must have some Vulcan logic genes buried in there somewhere. Think. While I, as your commanding officer, am required to consider certain painful consequences of not capitulating to what is a superior force, you, as engineer, should at least be interested in what tweaking is planned. Just think, the Secondprize may be the only ship in the fleet with the modifications the Hive intends." Maxine tried to appeal to her engineering chief's Ferengi nature of acquisition.

Goth chewed her lower lip with sharp teeth, finally asking, "You did mention a cloaking device?"

"Type 18, whatever that is. I doubt it resembles either Klingon or Romulan varieties. Brand new technology, here, on Secondprize, controlled by you."

"Fine! But, first, I must see all plans for the modifications and I, or a representative, will be present at all times as an observer." Unspoken distrust colored Goth's words.

"Acceptable," said a synthesized voice in stereo behind Maxine, origination the twin Hive drones.

"How do you do it?" asked Goth.

Delta, via body B, looked up from her plasma solder-iron to regard the Vulcan-Ferengi hybrid. "We are extremely busy. Elaborate upon your question, then allow us to return to productive work." Body A winced as a foot was accidentally stomped as the Pakled crewman - a hideous Starfleet cultural exchange experiment in Delta's estimation, one doomed to failure - tramped by, carrying a large mirror, purpose unknown.

"Efficiency," Goth waved a hand, the one holding a PADD, to indicate Secondprize's Main Engineering. A dozen Hive drones were busily modifying various systems while a similar number of nonHive Starfleet personnel were engaged in other activities, very few of them related to work. "How do you keep everyone in line? I can barely keep reasonable order within my department, and I hear that you have over five hundred bodies on that cube of yours in the same line of work."

"Engineering employs one thousand destinations; and additional drones are temporarily reassigned to engineering as necessary." Goth nodded eagerly as Delta paused. The chief engineer had become less hostile over the past twenty hours, perhaps due to lack of sleep. "Within the cranium of all drones," Delta tapped a finger to the side of the head of the communing body, "is an implant directly wired to the pain center. If a unit is out of line, corrective actions are swiftly applied." Delta neglected to add most Cube #347 drones quickly learned how to work around the implant, but the chief engineer was asking about theory, not reality.

Goth's expression was one of temptation, especially as dull Pakled Nor was beamed by a paintball round from the mezzanine. Regretfully she shook her head. "No, while the captain may go for it, Starfleet would have a - what is the human expression? - have a duck. Any other ideas?"

Delta shuffled through data files. "Species #7153 employs genetic engineering techniques. The thull caste has been modifying itself to fit the worker ideal for nearly eight hundred years."

"Nope. Take too long. I need something more immediate."

"Whips, chains, and torture are popular motivational tools for many societies at least once in their histories, if not more often."

Again temptation passed over Goth's face. "No, no. Nothing so overt."

A challenge. Delta dived again into files, searching esoteric leads. Finally she found a possible answer. "A suite of pacification techniques are used by species #5289 to alter the criminal behavior patterns. This approach may be adapted for your use. We can supply implants, which you must convince your crew to ingest. Once swallowed, the implants lodge in the wall of the gastrointestinal tract, connecting to key nerves. If you see or suspect behavior you wish to suppress, you input the name or identification string on a PADD device. In turn, your ship computer directs species specific subsonic harmonics on the offending unit, focusing on the implant signal. The unit, in turn, experiences nausea or disorientation. In the case nausea is an

insufficient goad, the implant can also directly inflict moderate amounts of pain or bowel discomfort." Delta paused. "We note that the technique functions best if the instigator does not inform the subject of the implant, as it can easily be removed by a physician. At request, however, the Hive can supply an implant which will bind via nanometer threads and perform limited modification of adjacent cells, allowing regeneration if scoured from the intestinal system. Although we are out of transporter range of Cube #347, sufficient technology and supplies exist on this vessel to allow us to construct the devices."

A wicked smile crossed Goth's features, revealing the scraggly, pointed teeth of a Ferengi. For a moment, her Vulcan heritage seemed insignificant. "Get me a bunch of those little buggers, and don't tell anyone else. Well, don't tell anyone else outside the Collective, especially not Captain Maxine."

"I think I might throw a little...pizza party."

Maxine read the latest report of systems upgrade activities from files delivered by her second-in-command. She hesitated as her eye caught a footnote.

"Goth is having a pizza party, engineering department only? That isn't like her," commented the captain. "At the very least, a party will lessen the atmosphere of efficiency she is always trying to cultivate."

Commander Na'tor shrugged. "Beats this cool cat, daddy-o. If I have the time, I may slip down to engineering and crash the party, get a free slab of pizza, the coolest of cool foods."

Maxine nodded. "If you do, tell me what you find later. I don't need my chief engineer to have a nervous breakdown. The last time that happened - that Togat fellow, remember? - the consequences were awfully messy. And embarrassing. I wonder if the Breen on Blarni Six have ever managed to get that green stain scrubbed off their environmental suits." She paused. "Anyway, it seems Goth has warmed up to the drones. No complaints in the last two hours."

Again Na'tor shrugged, then left the office and returned to the bridge.

Secondprize was on automatic drift with obstacle detection and evasion capability engaged. The technobabble simply meant a button on the helm console was currently depressed, allowing the computer to drive. While the Oort cloud of the system was denser than average, space was still vast, and the computer rarely had to alter course to avoid a tumbling chunk of primordial ice.

The potato-shaped comet nuclei approaching at an oblique angle was slightly larger than ten kilometers in length. The computer calculated the icy mountain's trajectory in relation to the Secondprize's own vector, concluding the ship would pass within half a kilometer, the astronomical equivalent of a very fine hair. There was no need to waste fuel by altering course.

The Secondprize passed behind the proto-comet, the system's distant primary easily eclipsed by the overwhelming bulk. As the ship made its closest approach, sensors suddenly acquired a new sign, organic, formerly masked by the signatures of frozen water and miscellaneous entrapped elements and simple compounds. The computer set off alarms on the Secondprize's decks, calling for a crewmember to take charge and tell it what to do. Only the Hive drones currently linked with Secondprize's systems might have had a chance to respond, except they were hobbled by the sudden need to penetrate internal security systems previously left uncompromised and the several milliseconds required for consensus as the sub-collective of Cube #347 considered what path to follow.

Swiftly the organic shape stooped from its resting place, resolving into a long, thick,



black segmented cylinder. Dark. As the creature approached, long tentacles formed from the epidermis, snapping forward to reach for the Secondprize. Because the Dark was approximately three times longer than the half kilometer gap between starship and frozen surface, less than a minute elapsed between detection, recognizance, and capture. Dangling impotent in the strong grasp of the Dark ambusher, the Secondprize was drawn relentlessly close in an unbreakable tangle of boneless arms.

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Eats-Too-Much, nicknamed Glutton by her peer-podmates, excitedly whistled in the hydrogen frequencies as exuded manipulatory tendrils closed around the odd shaped object. If Eats-Too-Much had been a human female, one would label her outburst girlish giggling. Also christened Excessive, the nine-season youngster tended towards an obsessive-compulsive nature, and often did everything to excess, from feeding to questing for knowledge to gossiping, and in this case, squealing with delight. Turning her catch end over end, ignoring the bursts of hot and cold which were occasionally ejected, the object was carefully inspected.

It had an unusual shape, utterly different from the comet nuclei she normally feasted upon, or the prized chunk of infrequent rock. Smooth the toy was, unnaturally so, with surprising and unexpected angles and points. Metal was the predominant taste, a flavor craved by all growing Dark as the inner, metal-rich system was the sole territory of breeding adults. Odd radioisotopes imparted a sharp tang, Eats-Too-Much noted with excitement, the emanations characteristic of materials required for faster-than-light travel. Except during migration when the entire clan-pod left a system and all members required FTL capabilities, again it was usually only breeding adults who had accumulated sufficient materials to break the light speed barrier. Eats-Too-Much would be the envy of her peers!

Ecstatic, Eats-Too-Much cast around for a nanny, a breeding adult on detail to patrol the juvenile pods, monitoring growth curves, answering questions, and ending disputes. The current nanny was Nurse, a smaller than average female who served as the primary pod midwife and healer. Eats-Too-Much liked Nurse, who in turn enjoyed the company of all her juvenile charges when on nanny detail. Nurse would tell Eats-Too-Much what the object was, and, most importantly, if it was poisonous or edible. Dark could eat many things, but sometimes one found an otherwise appealing menu item to include noxious additives.

::Nurse, Nurse,:: squealed Eats-Too-Much into the subspace ether, ::look what I caught! Can I eat it? Can I eat it? What is it? What is it? Can I eat it? Can I eat it?::

Nurse ponderously turned as Eats-Too-Much approached, electrical field reflecting mild annoyance. Eats-Too-Much was still giggling in the hydrogen frequencies even as her questions tumbled into an unanswerable jumble. ::Little Glutton, you are not so little anymore! In several seasons you will be a breeding adult, and such displays do not become an adult. Now, what are you nattering about? Remember, don't play with your food.::

Eats-Too-Much rolled, bringing her prize into view. Nurse was 1.8 kilometers in length, and the youngster a healthy 1.5 kilometers. Both dwarfed the catch. Firmly gripping the flat part as well as the two conveniently placed handles, she held up her prize for Nurse's inspection while defiantly replying, ::I do not play with my food. I just need to know if it is edible. If it isn't edible, I will play with it; otherwise, I will eat it. So, what is it, and can I eat it?::

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Here ends Part II of Dark Rising: "Dark Descending." Will Secondprize be eaten? Will the Dark find Cube #347? Will Delta and company overstep their lukewarm welcome? Will the author remember where she last left her car keys? These and other important questions will be answered in Part III. Well, except for the car keys, which somehow migrated to the kitchen counter.