HOLODREAMS

By Mark Daley

He awoke with a start. The usual subliminal background hiss of the air recycler had disappeared.

It was strange, normally it was just background noise and he paid no attention to it. Now it wasn't working, he couldn't help straining his ears to hear it.

He triggered the overhead light and swung his legs out of his bunk. As he stood the gravity shifted a little and he stumbled, he could never get used to the slight fluctuations in gravity on this ship.

This ship should be state of the art but was built to a budget on the lower crew quarters. All of the civilian crew lived in these lower quarters.

Standard gravity varied according to deck, he was on deck 18 and the gravity could vary by 5% or so. The upper decks were all a steady 1g, the higher the deck number the more variable the gravity was. All of these Terran Federation ships ran a standard 1g, if your home world was a higher or lower g world it didn't matter. One size fits all after all.

Rem's world happened to be 0.9g so he found the gravity to be a little heavy on these ships. The humidity and air pressure

were all wrong too, complain as he might he couldn't change the conditions in his quarters. To change those, you had to be an officer; he couldn't see his rank changing any time soon.

He regained his balance and walked over to the environmental controls by his food replicator. He studied the readouts. The master computer had turned off the air recycler for a half an hour or so whilst the backup system was rebooted. He guessed there was nothing to worry about.

As he was awake now and his shift start was another two hours away, he fixed himself a hot drink from the rather slim choices on his food replicator and sat down on his solitary room chair. He rubbed his face and the sparse bristles on his head for a moment whilst he sipped his drink.

At 42 standard years old he thought his life would have taken a different path than the one he was on. He could hear his mother's voice in his head saying 'You will never make anything of yourself Rem..'

He had tried to prove her wrong, but it was taking a lot longer than he planned it would.

Rem wasn't stupid by any means; he had taken the Star fleet entrance exam and had only failed on the astrogation course. He planned to take it again on his next ship rotation in six months.

Presently he was a third-grade hair technician or 'barber' as the Terrans would call it. He was currently serving aboard the USS

Canterbury on tour near the neutral zone after a brief stint on the USS *Darwin* operating the supply run between Vulcan and his own world in the Hercules constellation, Baatix.

He had enjoyed his stint on the *Darwin* as he had his own kind to talk to. Here on the *Canterbury* he was the only Baatixan and some of the crew teased him about his stature and called him Hercules.

A reference to Hercules the muscular hero of earth lore perhaps, or the fact he was from the Hercules constellation and decidedly short and thin.

The name Hercules was a great joke to some of the Terrans. Some of the things the Terrans thought were 'funny' were perplexing. He didn't like being around them too much, they had a strange smell for one thing and looked a little odd.

Those strange pink flaps either side of their bulbous heads were very strange. It also made his life difficult trying to avoid those pink flaps when cutting hair. Trying to keep his footing on his stool whilst wielding scissors was a challenge. Thankfully he had never had to deal with an Andorian, those waving tentacles on the front of the head were scary. Rem's bristles would stand on end just thinking about them.

Rem put his drink down and stood up, the gravity shifted again, and this time Rem stumbled into his desk and chafed his leg. Rubbing his leg and cursing, he hobbled off to get dressed.

The hair salon was on deck 11, amidships. Rem had to get a move on to get to his work station on time. His boss was a gigantic and frankly terrifying Terran. He trained in the high gravity gym every day and it showed in his massive arms and shoulders, everyone had a nickname onboard, his was 'Sweeney' for some reason. Terrans loved giving names to crew members that bore no resemblance to their actual name. Rem could never understand that.

Worse than the odd name was the man's temper, if Rem was just a few seconds late Sweeney would start shouting and waving his scissors about. It used to make the other patrons in the salon turn around to see what the commotion was, it used to make Rem blush right up to his scalp bristles.

Today thankfully, Rem made it in on time. The worst he got from his boss was a sideways glare whilst he was busy cutting the chief petty officer's hair.

Rem got straight into his work and grabbed his scissors and his stool and motioned over one of the Terran male ensigns that had just turned up. The male lower ranks were easy to please, short all over with clippers usually. Vulcans were the easiest to please as a trim around an upturned bowl on their head did the trick.

If you did make a bit of a mess of a haircut, which was rare, they hardly ever complained as most of the customers were the lower ranks and they were rather too low down on the pecking or-

der to cause a fuss. The braver ones were soon shut down by Sweeney, all he had to do was stand over them and flex his arms whilst telling them that they were mistaken. It usually did the trick.

The day went by and Rem kept daydreaming about what he would do with his hour of holodeck time he had tonight. These slots were precious as there were only two holodecks. Rem had one hour per month and that was it.

Officers got an hour per week, one of the perks of being an officer. Yet another reason why Rem had to pass that entrance exam and get into Starfleet.

It would be worth it just to shut his mother up.

He had one of the more friendly techies write a program for him so that he didn't have to waste time trying to figure out how to do it. It was risky stuff as some of the safety protocols were being 'relaxed', protocols that were there for a reason after all. Safety protocols always needed command authority to override unless you knew ways to amend the software accordingly.

There wasn't much point in having a Holo experience that didn't feel real enough was there? Rem had given the technician some Tranya for his troubles, even though it had cost him replicator privileges for the next six months. It was basic rations and no drink from now on.

Rem could have used the ten-forward lounge for food but there was a very annoying Trill in there called Rigo Bel that had just transferred to the ship as some sort or bartender/entertainments officer. His whiny 'always happy' voice grated on Rem's nerves. He would suddenly appear at your table and ask if you wanted something weird you had never heard of before. He would then go off on a half hour description of it after you had said you didn't want it. The fact that he was a minor celebrity because he had served on the Enterprise made it all the worse, he was only too happy to tell people of his adventures, whether they actually wanted to listen to them or not. Ten-forward was best avoided.

Finally, the shift had ended. Rem started cleaning down his work station and sweeping up all of the hair and clippings ready to go into the biomass reclaimer. He didn't like to think what the reclaimer did to all of this bio waste. He had done the mandatory Federation ship induction and so knew enough about the systems to make him feel a little sick when he thought about where the initial mass came from for replicator use.

Everything was recycled, EVERYTHING!

Putting his brush away, he scuttled past Sweeney with his eyes down and out into the corridor to join the throng of crew going about their business. As per usual he had pushing and shoving and the odd elbow to dodge, he was simply too small and in-

significant for most crew to even notice him. Crew engrossed in their PADD tablets were the worst, they simply did not look where they were walking.

He awoke with a start, something was wrong! The gravity was too light and there were some strange muffled sounds out in the corridor. He swung his legs out of the bunk and staggered when he tried to stand up.

Suddenly the ship's red alert klaxon went off and he was shocked to feel a sudden prickly sensation on his skin. He was being transported!!

He materialized in the aft tactical weapons locker, the ship had detected a threat and used side to side transport to get him to a weapons locker. Despite the slight disorientation and the low emergency lighting, he quickly got a locker open and hurriedly dressed in boots, thick work trousers and a vest.

A ceramic knife was added at his belt and a holstered type iv phaser with two additional power packs. Full tactical combat webbing was added too.

He added one of his favorites, a coil of nanowire and a pair of ceramid gloves. He put the gloves on and adjusted the strap fit across his wrist.

Thankfully, the klaxon suddenly stopped. He could at least think clearly without all of that noise.

Rem composed himself and thumbed the door release before stepping out into the corridor, phaser at the ready.

The corridor had a burned metal smell but was at least empty.

He thumbed the phaser to the highest setting and set off along the corridor to the turbolift, the emergency lights illuminating his progress. His shadow cast flickering images on the bulkhead.

The turbolift was working, but where to go? The bridge was out of the question. The senior officers would have their hands full dealing with whatever had happened to the ship. He decided that engineering would be a better option, there was a separate auxiliary command section there.

As the doors swished open on the engineering deck Rem came face to face with an armed Romulan! The Romulan's mouth dropped open slightly and he started to raise his disruptor carbine. It was the last thing he did; Rem's hand instinctively fell to his ceramic knife and in one fluid motion the knife was in his hand and into the Romulans throat.

Rem twisted the knife and pulled it free, the Romulan fell backward, a wet gurgling sound coming from in between the fingers clenched across his own throat. Green blood splashed down the Romulans front as well as Rem's vest as he fell.

The hot wash of a disrupter blast fanned Rem's face as the blast hit the wall, just missing him.

Rem raised his phaser, his training making every movement a trained and perfect response. He crouched and fired, the blast

hit the Romulan assailant square in the chest. His ablative armor useless against a full power blast at close range. He fell twitching to the decking. Rem had already launched himself over a console and was crouched and ready before the Romulan had twitched his last.

He quickly scanned the area. Apart from the Romulans it was clear. That's until he noticed two members of the ships engineering crew casually stuffed into the plasma conduit inspection port behind him. They were clearly dead, both bodies from what he could see bore disrupter blast damage. More than likely they would have been tortured briefly to get any useful computer codes to use. They would not have had easy deaths.

A Romulan two-man patrol was all there was here in engineering. Romulans tended to be over confident and cocky, two-man teams were considered to be fine for penetration exercises.

Rem straightened and moved over to the two Romulans. He quickly disabled their two disrupters and dragged the two bodies out of sight. The engineering crew would have to stay where they were for now. He would make sure that they were retrieved and treated with respect.

The excess green blood on the floor was wiped up using a Romulans tunic borrowed for the purpose. The casual observer would not have noticed anything out of the ordinary in the room.

He moved quickly over to the main console and holstered his phaser whilst scrutinizing the readout, he realized he was still gripping his knife. He wiped it on his vest and re sheathed it.

His fingers danced across the console bringing up the menu screens he needed.

Central computer AI had locked down every crew quarters, no-one could get out of their quarters. It could only be overridden with security authority. All subspace comms were down, the ship had not sent any distress calls. The transponder has also been turned off along with all non -essential systems. The ship was dead in the water. The Romulans had the codes they need-ed, if Rem had not stopped them, the ship would have been un-derway, probably on impulse power to Romulan space by now. The warp drive was offline so it's all they had, they could have made it in an hour or so from the last position of the ship Rem was aware of.

The Romulans were busy trying to route command control sec-tion by section to engineering when Rem had disturbed them.

The bridge had barricaded themselves in, the Romulans had re-alized this and sent a team to try and get the captain. Taking a starship captain with all of the access codes and command codes for a ship would be quite a coup for the Romulans. Trac-ing the captain's nerves pathways out with electrical probes would soon got the information they so dearly wanted. It was the most painful death ever devised. Terrans could be cruel, but the Romulans had perfected cruelty to an art form.

Rem's next course of action was to disable the command section here in engineering to stop the Romulans using it to try and control the ship. It's obvious that they wanted to get just enough access to the ship's systems to get it over into Romulan space.

How could so large a ship fall so easily? Who had helped them from the inside? These were questions that would have to wait for answers.

He input his command clearance into the console to allow him access to the computer memory panel. He knelt down to pull the panel off and removed two isolinear chips. A quick and dirty trick but effective. Isolinear chips could only be replaced by modules of the same type and for security reasons they were kept right across the other end of the ship. There was no way the chips could be replaced quickly. The auxiliary command center was now disabled, it would be bypassed by the main computer AI.

The entire ship could now only be controlled from the bridge. Although the drive and magnetic containment were still operational, the computer had put them into standby. It would take 30 mins to get them back on line.

The two chips were stashed quickly into a pouch on his webbing belt and he replaced the panel.

His next course of action was to fight his way to the bridge to regain ship control!!

Back out in the corridor Rem thought about his next course of action. Just to be on the safe side he put a short full power phaser burst into the door to engineering to disable it. He couldn't risk the Romulans finding the bodies and raising the alarm. The risk of using the noisy phaser in the corridor was one he was willing to take.

Romulan operating procedure was to keep radio silence until mission end, he had some time until they realized that the mission was in jeopardy. They would also have herded the crew that wasn't on lock down, into the ships biggest internal space. The shuttledeck. The crew could be disposed of in one go by depressurising the deck. As soon as they became useless as hostages that is.

Rem moved off with a sprinter's run to the access ladder to the internal inspection conduit, this time he went phaser in hand and teeth clenched. Sweating, he began his ascent through the bowels of the ship.

Rem saw no-one else until he got to the deck below the bridge. He had navigated over 14 decks by the internal inspection conduits they were narrow inspection tubes with hardly any room and stiflingly hot. He didn't want a surprise like the last one when coming out of a turbolift!

Carefully moving down the corridor Rem stopped at the corridor junction by the bridge access ladder. Using a small mirror from a pouch in his webbing belt, Rem could see a Romulan

guard from his vantage point directly behind and to the right. The guard was only three meters away and appeared to be leaning on the bulkhead with his rifle in his left hand.

Rem knew he could not use his phaser as the sound would alert others in the area, he couldn't risk throwing his knife either. The guard would be wearing ablative chest and back armor so a knife would bounce off.

There was nothing for it but the nanowire...clutching the wire in his gloved hands, he crept forward.

The guard never knew what happened, the wire was dropped over his head and around his neck and pulled tight. Nanowire cuts easily through most things, including Romulans. The guard never made a sound, the only sounds were Rem's breathing and the sound of the green sickly blood quickly dripping on the decking.

Rem pulled the wire free and rewound it to stash in his webbing. He wiped his gloved hands on his own vest before dragging the guard out of sight around into the next corridor. The Romulan's disrupter was disabled as the others had been.

The gravity surged again, and Rem rocked on his heels. He steeled himself for his next move.

Carefully Rem climbed the ladder up to the bridge deck, sweat running down his face. He couldn't have his phaser or knife at the ready when climbing. He knew there would be Romulans

outside the bridge trying their best to get in. His hope was that they would be too preoccupied to notice him.

Rem got to the bridge deck and popped his head out of the conduit for a split second and pulled it back in. He closed his eyes to use the afterimage his brief glimpse had given him.

There were three Romulans busy using a plasma torch on the sliding doors to the bridge, all of them were armed. That door was the only way in, it was impossible to beam in or out of the room as it was fitted with independent pattern disrupters.

It was now or never...he had one kill shot in the phaser, it couldn't cycle fast enough to take out two Romulans, never mind three.

Rem launched himself out of the conduit just as one of the Romulans half turned towards him. The ceramic knife flew from Rem's right hand into the first Romulan's left eye. Rem's maximum power phaser burst from the phaser in his left hand and burned through the ablative armor on the second Romulan, dropping him smoking to the decking.

Barely had Rem finished pulling the trigger when the third Romulan pushed the plasma torch over and leaped at him.

Instinct and training saved Rem from the sweeping elbow blow and subsequent kick aimed at his head. Rem parried the blows but lost his phaser in the melee. He was able to land an upward palm strike to the nose of his assailant. Gravity surged again

weakly and Rem's follow up strike to the Romulan's temple missed its mark.

The Romulan recovered slightly and launched a high arching kick, catching Rem off-guard but he was able to partly sweep the leg aside to stamp down on the Romulan's ankle. There was a satisfying crunch and a yelp from the Romulan as he toppled to one side.

Rem quickly rolled the other way and was able to sweep up his phaser and get to his feet. He aimed a phaser burst at the Romulan now trying to get upright with a broken ankle.

The phaser blast knocked him down again, his ablative armor saving him from a lethal blast. Luckily for the Romulan the phasers power setting had been on low as its power pack was low on charge.

Rem, panting for breath, stood over his assailant. The Romulan was out cold and bleeding from his nose and mouth. According to his slightly scorched uniform the man was a Centurion. Rem had done well to survive the encounter. Romulan centurions were some of the best trained soldiers in the military. They always preferred a hand to hand approach to show how fearless they were.

Rem's attention was bought back to the plasma torch which was on its side, he quickly skirted it and turned it off. He quickly unspooled his nanowire and wrapped it around the unconscious centurions' wrists and remaining good ankle. The broken one was swelling, the boot on that foot would need cutting off.

The gravity surged again.

Rem had to get in the bridge but had to make sure that the Romulan threat had abated. There were probably hundreds of people under Romulan control in the shuttledeck. He turned to access the door panel to the bridge, it was unmarked as the Romulans had no chance of getting the doors open without computer authority or the right command codes. It's why they had used a plasma torch.

As he started inputting his override code, something moved in his peripheral vision.

He instinctively ducked and half turned. A heavy fist slammed into his face, he crashed to the decking stunned. Strong hands were suddenly around his throat, squeezing the life from him. A huge weight was on his chest.

Rem was using all his strength to stop his throat being crushed by gripping his assailant's massive arms.

The fight almost ran out of Rem when he recognized Sweeney as his assailant!!

Rem released Sweeney's arms just long enough to jab a thumb into the man's eye. The grip on Rem's throat subsided long enough for him to gulp some air. Putting everything he had into one last effort he was able to roll away from under the bigger man. As soon as he was clear he swung a right fist as hard as he could at the other man's temple.

Sweeney was stunned for a second, this was enough time to follow up with a left to the jaw and a short stiff fingered jab to the throat, sweeney shrugged this attack off and countered.

A leg came around in a sweeping arc to connect to Rem's head, he saw stars! Rem instinctively bought a knee up to connect with the big man's groin, it wasn't enough as a meaty fist smashed into his ear.

Gasping for air and semi blinded with pain, Rem twisted away and up onto his knees. He sprang forward to deliver a double handed blow to the bigger man's head.

Sweeney staggered back onto his heels, stunned. He recovered very quickly with a roundhouse kick aimed at Rem's head. Rem blocked the kick but was grabbed by the bigger man and thrown to the ground. A stamping kick was narrowly avoided by rolling to one side. A further kick glanced off Rem's hip.

Rem swept Sweeney's feet from under him and leapt for his own phaser which was lying next to the dead Romulan. He just managed to thumb the setting to stun as Sweeney slammed into him. A short strobing burst was all he could manage. Sweeney slumped, he was now a dead weight lying on top of Rem, Rem pushed him off to one side, struggling with the effort.

The Romulan was showing signs of motion, so Rem gave him a short stun burst from the phaser to keep him unconscious. The phaser power cell was dead, so Rem quickly flicked it out and

pushed another fresh cell into the phaser from his webbing. This was another reflex action through years of training.

He slumped to the decking breathing hard, the pain in his face and ear was washing over him. He took a stim tablet from his webbing and dry swallowed it, in just a few moments he felt better. He climbed to his feet and retrieved his knife, he checked his phaser and stepped over to the door control for the bridge.

As the door shuddered open on its damaged mechanism, he stood to one side, he didn't want to be phasered by anyone on the bridge that was a bit trigger happy.

He shouted out 'It's Rem, everything is under control. Please lower your weapons, I'm coming in'.

Rem raised his hands and slowly stepped through the door onto the bridge.

There were six people on the bridge, the captain and the first officer plus helm, communications and science officers. The security officer was lowering his phaser as Rem came closer.

All of them looked shocked and shaky. This was not surprising as armed Romulans had tried to break into the bridge. There was also the sight of Rem, sweating and with his own and green Romulan blood spattered and smeared across his face, arms and vest.

Captain Cole quickly rose from his chair and composed himself, adjusting his tunic as he did so. He was the very picture of au-

thority and command, a starship captain, the best of the best. It was a sight to instill confidence.

'Mr Rem, report..' said the Captain. Rem quickly filled in the captain and the assembled officers on what had gone on. It took a little time to explain what Rem had experienced and what his assessment of the situation was.

Captain Cole quickly retired to his ready room to appraise Starfleet command of the situation. He left his first officer to take control, once he was happy that his orders were understood.

The first officer was a decorated veteran and was briskly issuing orders to the security chief and communications officer, he also summoned the EMH to see to Rem's wounds. Whilst Rem was receiving some medical attention, security was busy putting into place a rescue strategy.

The rescue of the hostages under Romulan control in the shuttle deck was now a priority.

All the other bridge officers were busy at their stations, bringing the ship out of its computer induced torpor. From the babble of voices he heard sub space comms had been bought on line and he heard the comms officer asking for assistance from ships in the area. Additional engineering staff were being prepped to beam into engineering once security had swept the area and the pattern disrupters disengaged.

Rem didn't know what the engineers would make of the carnage down there. These engineers had never seen any action, most of their lives were sat behind computer screens or in simulations. It would hit them hard seeing dead friends and colleagues.

The security team would have laid out the bodies for initial examination inside a containment field. This was just to make sure they had not been booby trapped in any way.

The Romulan captors on the shuttle deck must have realized that takeover plan had failed as soon as four armed Federation security officers began to materialize onto the shuttle deck.

The Romulans fought well. Two security officers were quickly despatched with accurate disruptor fire. Several 'hostages' were gunned down in the initial brief firefight.

The hostages panicked and ran screaming towards the entrance as soon as the firefight broke out. They were met with a lethal volley of disruptor fire. The Romulans were firing on the civilians to cause even more panic.

One Romulan was quickly swamped by the mass of people. The disruptor was in his hands but he was unable to stop the wave of people bearing down on him. He went down in a swirl of limbs; one man was seen wrestling the disruptor from the Romulan and beating him with the stock of the weapon. Punches and kicks rained down on the fallen Romulan from the mass of people around him. Very soon he was dead, a green bloody pulp.

The second Romulan guard was taken out by simultaneous phaser blasts from the remaining security officers. He too was swamped by people maddened on revenge.

Humankind had put war behind them on Earth, there had been peace for a hundred years. In one savage moment mankind had reverted to barbarism on the shuttle deck of the *Canterbury*. Ordinary people had beaten one Romulan to death, screaming whilst they did it. The second, whilst already dead, suffered the same fate. Both were torn to pieces and left in a bloody pulp.

The panicked shrieking and crying was beginning to die down as soon as the hostages realized that their ordeal was over. People were cradling dead or dying friends, others were getting impromptu first aid. Yet more were aimlessly wandering around in complete shock.

A medical team was soon on the scene as were more security officers, weapons drawn.

It was all over...

The Federation had sent two Invincible class ships to the area, and they would arrive in a few hours. They would patrol along the border to monitor any movements from the Romulan side. This little foray of theirs could well have been the start of something bigger.

Other ships, responding to the initial call, were also warping in to assist and escort the *Canterbury* to safe space.

The *Canterbury* had been ordered to the nearest star base for a complete re-fit.

The ship would get a thorough shakedown; every system would be inspected and replaced. The ship had not even been able to signal distress. The ship AI had only the time to start an interim emergency response to being boarded but had shut down immediately afterwards.

It's clear that a virus or targeted attack had shut it down very quickly. The entire AI system would come under Binar scrutiny.

It was theoretically possible that the Romulans had used some sort of 'shield tunnel' matched to the shield harmonics. A fraction of a second, where the shield was penetrated in a tiny section, was just enough time to beam a small boarding party across from a cloaked ship.

The ramifications of all of this would be immense, crossing the neutral zone by either Federation or Romulan was a clear act of war. The Romulans would of course deny all knowledge and the Federation would accuse them of spying or worse, i.e the attempted theft of a Federation vessel. If the Romulans had stolen the vessel they would have had the time to reverse engineer it to get some insight into the technology. The Romulans were obsessed in weapons technology any edge they could find would be used in their own expanding star empire.

More than a little weary, Rem made his way back to his quarters pondering how all this had happened. The only conclusion he could come up with was the fact that customers tend to talk to their barber whilst having their hair cut. They would talk about their day at work, what they were working on, sometimes in detail. It was ridiculous, but it was the only thing that he could make fit the evidence.

It was something that had been going on since time immemorial. Sweeney must have taken years to put together all the snippets of information he had heard and use it to try and take over a Federation ship, albeit with Romulan help. Rem couldn't help thinking that Sweeney was just a cog within a bigger machine operating in the Federation.

It made sense now that he had refused all other rotations on other ships to stick to this one ship patrolling the neutral zone.

Rem was approaching his quarters now; the corridor smelled like the one outside of tactical earlier. He thumbed entry and triggered the light….

'Computer, end program' said Rem. The walls of his room swam and coalesced into the familiar checked pattern of the holodeck. He quickly made his way to the door just as the next person had arrived for their allocated slot.

Rem's technician friend had written the holodeck program so that it would revert all safeties back to normal on being terminated, it also erased all the logs. The last thing Rem wanted was to be mopping the floors in a Federation prison for the next two

years for running an illegal program. He would think twice about running programs like that again, more than a little risky.

He hurriedly made his way back to his quarters, a little battered and bruised from his adventure.

He awoke with a start and triggered the light. It was 08:00 and he was late! Rem struggled to get up, his body aching. He hurriedly dressed, still brain fogged by sleep and confusion. He opened his door and hobbled on aching legs for the turbolift...

Rem steeled himself and scuttled in to the Salon, hoping not to be seen. Sweeney was already in and glared at Rem as he entered. The funny thing was that Rem thought he saw a half wink ..just the faintest glimmer of one, and then it was gone!!

He picked up his scissors stood on his stool and motioned over his first customer of the day...'gods preserve me', thought Rem, it was the Trill...

The End