

FROM THE AVENGER LOGS...

THY AVENGING SPIRIT

By Zachary Zulkowski

Vice Admiral Rosenzweig went back to the center seat after helping a member of the bridge crew who'd been burned by a short-circuiting console.

"Whatever it was we went through,* he thought, *we seem to have weathered it quite nicely.* He glanced at the Ensign, who was awaiting the arrival of a medic. *Mostly.* He pressed the inter-ship address control on his chair-arm console.

"All hands, this is the Admiral. Secure from general quarters. All damage control teams report." He turned to face Lt. Commander Ciufo at the Sciences station. "Augie, what was that we just passed through?"

"Don't know..." Ciufo answered, shaking his head. "The computer interprets it as a localized energy field, but it can't tell me whether it was a natural phenomenon or not. It can't seem to give us any more than that."

"What's its current status?"

"Gone," August said. "It popped into existence, then popped out after we passed through it. Strange..."

"Keep me informed of anything you can find out," the Admiral said.

"Ah, sir, this is Ensign Donovan," a voice from the intercom reported. "We seem to have only one casualty, in Sciences Lab 3."

"Go on," Alex responded.

"One of the crew seems to be, well...dead."

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"One of the paramedics confirmed it," Ensign Donovan continued. "Dr. Fillmore is on her way down."

"What's the apparent cause of death?" Rosenzweig questioned. *The storm wasn't that bad...*

"We don't know. Maybe you should take a look."

"I'm coming," Alex said. He then turned to Commander Maldonado, who was at the Sciences station talking to Lt. Commander Ciufo, while at the same time tapping at one of the displays. "Carlos, take the con. I think something is wrong down in Sciences." He then walked over to the turbo-lift, then turned back. "Augie, it's your division..."

Ciufo nodded. "Yes..." He followed the Admiral into the lift.

A few minutes later they were in Science Lab 3, with Ensign Donovan's damage control team and the medical team that had accompanied them. At a table near one of the control consoles, a body was seated and slumped over, his left hand rigid on the controls and his right hand frozen into a claw grasping at the air in front of him. It looked like the life had been torn out of him. The Admiral motioned over one of the paramedics.

"Identification?" he asked, softly.

A med tech handed a tricorder to the Admiral, so he could read the data on the small viewer. "Brocton, Bruce C. Lieutenant. Scientist, Astrophysics."

The tech said, "Apparently, he was collecting computer data on the storm when--"

Rosenzweig nodded to the Ensign, then turned toward Ciufo. "Augie, how long was he in your division?" he asked.

"Six or seven months, I think," Ciufo answered. "He was one of the transferees from the McAuliffe."

"I'll want to view his personnel and medical records. I need to know more before I write a letter to his family."

"I'll co-sign the authorization as soon as I can," August said quietly.

"I know," Alex said, picking up on the Chief Science Officer's mood.

Dr. Wendy Fillmore then entered the room, followed by a gurney pulled by two orderlies. Right on their heels, Security Chief Csuti and two guards walked in.

"Was...anything disturbed?" Csuti asked.

Both Admiral Rosenzweig and Lt. Commander Ciufo held up their palms to indicate that nobody had touched anything.

"Admiral, I'll need a copy of the FLIDAR recording..."

"As soon as I'm through looking at it."

Dr. Fillmore was helping the techs lower the body onto the gurney. She checked for a pulse and scanned Brocton with a tricorder.

"Well?" the Admiral asked her.

"Brain is completely flat-lined, body temperature's still warm, no sign of rigor. He's been dead for about ten minutes."

"Any sign of a cause?"

She shook her head. "Nothing obvious. I'll have to do an autopsy."

"Let me know the minute you find anything," Rosenzweig said. He then turned to the Security Chief. "Bob, seal this room."

Everyone watched the doctor take Lt. Brocton to Sickbay, then left the room for the turbo-lifts.

The crew cleared the way for the group en route to Sickbay. Dr. Fillmore walked ahead, studying the tricorder while the two orderlies guided the gurney as it hovered about a meter off the floor. No one noticed when the body's eyes opened for a brief moment.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 9411.06, Vice Admiral Alex Rosenzweig recording:

The U.S.S. Avenger, while on routine patrol near Star System L117GA, has passed through an energy field of unknown configuration. One of the crew is dead, for no apparent reason. An autopsy is being performed. The ship seems to be in good shape, with only a few minor aftereffects. I have ordered us to Starbase 29 to transfer Lt. Brocton's remains and effects for Earthbound transport. Meanwhile, an investigation is underway to determine any connection between Lieutenant Brocton's death, and the phenomenon we passed through."

The Admiral sat at his station in the center of the bridge, and watched the activity around him as it flowed at reasonable normali-

ty. A signal came through on his com-panel, and he touched the switch. "Rosenzweig here."

"AI, this is Wendy," Dr. Fillmore said. "I'm finished with the autopsy. I think you'd better take a look at this."

"I'll be right down," the Admiral said. With a nod to Maldonado, he left the bridge.

As soon as he walked into Sickbay, the doctor thrust a data padd into his hand.

"Death due to complete cerebral arrest. Cause: undetermined," the Admiral read.

"That's about it."

He looked at Fillmore. "What do you mean?"

The doctor shrugged. "No sign of trauma, disease, or anything else I can find that could lead to this," she answered. "There's no synaptic activity at all. His brain simply stopped functioning."

Rosenzweig could see past Fillmore from the office in which they were standing into the examination room. Brocton's body lay with his head turned on its side. His eyes were clearly open.

"What the...?"

"What?" the doctor asked, looking around the room.

The Admiral blinked, and he saw the body back in its normal position, eyes closed, all snug under its surgical frame. "Uh...nothing," he said, rubbing his eyes. "It's been a long day."

"I'll have his remains taken to stasis," Wendy said. "May I inquire as to his personal effects?"

"They'll be placed in storage... No, I'm having his cabin sealed. I'll talk it over with Csuti."

"I suppose that's a good idea, considering how he died."

"And until I find out EXACTLY how he died, I'm taking every precaution. I don't like this." Admiral Rosenzweig then handed the doctor the datapadd back and left the room.

On his way to a turbo-lift, he ran into the Security Chief.

"Bob, I need to talk to you."

"Sir?"

"Lt. Brocton is being transferred to the stasis area. I want two security guards posted there at all times. I know this sounds strange..."

"Not really. I'll get on it right away."

"Good. I also want his cabin sealed. Have his roommate assigned somewhere else."

"It's already taken care of."

Good! Alex thought to himself. He nodded to Csuti and headed for the bridge.

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Ship's night. Delta Shift hours. Most of the crew were asleep. Rosenzweig had just gotten to sleep, himself, after reading the latest astrophysics journal articles; for some reason that particular science had been bothering him lately.

A voice cut through the quiet of the cabin. "ALERT, ALERT, THERE IS AN EMERGENCY ON LEVEL 10, SECTION D." Rosenzweig sat up quickly, shushing his fire-lizard, who had also been awakened by the voice.

The signal was a private computer alert for the Admiral, so he could decide if it was necessary to alert the whole ship. It was only supposed to be used on "special" occasions.

"REPEAT, THERE IS AN EMERGENCY ON LEVEL 10 SECTION D."

"Gods, that's the stasis area!" he said, immediately threw a robe on over his black sleeping clothes, and headed for the turbo-lift. A few minutes later he was at the site of the emergency.

There were several security people there, probing the area with tricorders. A medical team was gurneying out what was left of two bodies, bodies covered by blankets, bodies wearing security armor. The entrance to the stasis area had been replaced by a large gaping hole, as though a large wild animal had smashed through it from inside.

"What happened--?" the Admiral started to say.

Lt. Commander Csuti approached him. "One of the engineering crew heard the noise and reported it. This just happened."

"The two guards...."

"Ensign Lorraine Fitzgerald and Ensign Shenad. They've been killed...torn to pieces. There's something else you should see."

The Security Chief led him into stasis area proper. On the floor was what was left of a coffin shaped container: Lt. Brocton's stasis unit.

"How...?"

"It was torn apart from inside."

Rosenzweig looked around the room, as if deciding he was in the midst of a nightmare. Then he turned back to Csuti. "Send the pieces to Engineering. Tell them to subject them to every conceivable test. I also want a scientific and engineering team to examine every inch of this area. Security readiness is to be doubled."

"Should I institute an intruder alert?"

"No... not yet," he replied. After a moment's thought, he added, "Increase the security rotation, though."

"Aye, aye, sir."

It was about the middle of the next day, and Lieutenant Alvin Jankin was at one of the Sciences library stations, busily cross-referencing data from the storm scan in the Astrophysics database with the Engineering and Life Sciences database in order to check for correlations. Pausing for a moment, he took a sip of coffee. He then continued his search on a particular item. A moment later, the data on his terminal viewer started to jumble.

What is this! he thought to himself, lightly tapping the side of the terminal. *First I get moved, now this! I'm trying to work here!*

The terminal got worse, and then he heard footsteps from behind him.

He turned around...

He never had time to scream, never had time to react at all.

A few hours later the place was crowded with a security team. The terminal and its desk were smashed to pieces. There was blood everywhere, and Lieutenant Jankin's body...

"Just like the security guards," Alex said.

"What's going on here...?" Security Chief Csuti wondered aloud.

"I don't know," Rosenzweig answered him, "but I intend to find out. This entire situation is getting impossible."

Just then a call came in on a nearby intercom. The Admiral answered it.

"Admiral, this is Maldonado. Please report to the bridge. There's something you should see."

"I'm on my way."

Later...

"Computer, play back the Main Viewer log for Stardate 9411.06.05.07," Commander Maldonado instructed. He then directed the Admiral's attention to the main screen.

The main screen showed the lights and flashes of the storm, as bright and turbulent as ever, then disappearing altogether.

"Notice the time index," Carlos said.

Alex saw that it read, "9411.06.05.07.03."

"That's about the time Lieutenant Brocton's life signs were no longer being registered by the computer," Lt. Commander Ciufo added.

"He died at almost the exact moment the storm vanished," Carlos finished.

"Have you tried to scan the ship for an energy pattern similar to the storm's?" the Admiral asked.

"That's just it," Ciufo said. "We're having trouble with the computer. It's some sort of sporadic glitch."

"Sporadic?"

"It's first in one place, then another," Ciufo elaborated, "completely random. It was first in the main storage areas, then it showed up in one of the Science Labs."

Wait a minute... Alex thought.

He then walked to the center seat and activated the Intraship Address. "Attention, all personnel. We have discovered a dangerous intruder. All nonessential personnel are hereby ordered to go to their quarters and remain there until further notice. You are to lock your doors and not open them to anyone, except on my authorization. That is all."

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"Carlos, I'll be in my Ready Room. I have some things to do." As the non-critical personnel started to clear the bridge and as Rosenzweig left, Commander Maldonado followed him to the doors of the turbo-lift.

"Do you really think that's necessary? They are Star Fleet."

"Carlos," the Admiral said softly, "there is something on this ship killing people, and until we stop it, I don't want anyone in its way!" He walked onto the lift, leaving the Commander to watch his departure. Maldonado returned to the command chair.

The Admiral made his way to his Ready Room, which adjoined the bridge. Entering the room, he sat down behind his desk and directed his attention to the computer terminal.

"Computer, I want access to the flight recordings of Storage Area 7. Time: current."

"PLEASE STAND BY FOR IDENTIFICATION."

The Admiral waited. He knew the regulations. Only the Commanding Officer was authorized to view the flight recording of any part of the ship, unless there was accident or crisis that rendered the CO unable to act.

The computer scanned his eyes, and found a positive identification. The image on his terminal's viewer changed to show the storage area in question, and the activity there now: the Sciences and Engineering teams scanning the area with tricorders.

"Computer, focus on area in grid 7C."

The viewing angle changed to display the stasis chamber.

"Computer, reverse viewing, normal speed."

The view changed again. This time, the events on the screen ran backward: the room being cleared, the room empty, static, then the room empty with status chamber intact.

Static...

For several minutes there was no image on the screen, only static. This was impossible.

"Computer run recording forward from Stardate 9411.07.02.04, normal speed."

"WORKING."

The scene ran forward. Again there was static, and after that: a smashed coffin, and a wrecked door.

"Computer, explain loss of image between Stardate 9411.07.02.06. to 9411.07.02.09."

"FLIGHT RECORDER DISABLED DURING TIME INDICATED."

"Computer, explain."

"UNABLE TO COMPLY."

Rosenzweig had a idea. "Computer, flight recorder, Sciences Lab D, stardate 9411.07.05, same authorization."

"WORKING."

The screen then showed the lab, with Lt. Jankin working alone at one of the terminals. The time the Admiral indicated would have been the beginning of the day shift. He had the computer fast forward it.

Static...

Vice Admiral Rosenzweig was not surprised. Of all the things that had happened lately, this was basically the only consistency they shared. *Oh, gods!* he thought, *that thing can control our computer systems.*

He touched his intercom panel. "Rosenzweig to bridge."

"Maldonado here."

Alex was glad the exec had stayed on the bridge. "What's our status?"

"On course for Starbase 29 as ordered. ETA is 3.5 hours."

"Change course. Take us out into deep space."

Maldonado looked surprised at the order. "May I inquire as to why, sir?"

"No, you may not," the Admiral replied tersely. "Just follow the order. Rosenzweig out." Alex fell back into his chair, and let out a deep breath. *I just pulled rank on one of my closest friends.*

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"Captain's Log, Stardate 9411.08: Vice Admiral Alex Rosenzweig reporting. The events of the past few days are, by any standards, unbelievable. Whatever has killed Lt. Brocton has just escaped from...confinement and has already killed three of my crew. I have ordered all non-essential personnel to their quarters, and we operate on what is essentially a skeleton crew. I have ordered phasers and communicators issued to all active personnel, and told them to avoid using both the com-network and the turbo-lifts."

The Admiral and Chief Csuti were walking down the corridor toward one of the storage rooms. The lights began to flicker, then die, only to be reborn as a soft glow. Rosenzweig pulled out his communicator and flipped it open.

"Rosenzweig to Engineering. Geordie, what's going on down there?"

"Oh...I don't know!" The Chief Engineer said, perplexed and bothered. "The auto sequencer for the interior lights is not working right; the main computer is not keeping them steady."

"Have you tried a manual bypass?"

"I've tried," Commander Padovan answered. "Nothing seems to work. It's like I have some sort of computer virus in the system, and I can't pin it down to bypass it."

"George, I need those lights," Alex ordered. "With this intruder present, now is not the time to be running around in the dark!"

"I understand," George replied. "The current condition is the best I can do, and I had to short out a couple of control relays to achieve that."

"Understood," the Admiral acknowledged. Then a thought came to him.

"George, did you say something about a 'computer virus'?"

"Yes. It seems to be moving about the ship, disrupting electrical systems, ion fields, you name it."

"Have life-support systems been disrupted?"

"Not very much, or we'd all be dead now. I had people monitoring the life support systems as soon as this started happening."

"I'm calling a...conference of war," the Admiral said. "I can't tell you where it is, not over the communicators. I am going to have to tell everyone face to face. You stay put, and keep me updated on everything that happens."

"Affirmative," George replied, before Rosenzweig broke the connection.

A Conference of War.

That was what went through Vice Admiral Rosenzweig's head as he and Bob Csuti reached the room. It was one of the little-used auxiliary storage areas on the *Avenger*, chosen because of its location in one of the non-critical areas of the ship. The only furnishings were the long table and chairs in the center, the light provided by a hand-lamp placed in the center. The corridors leading to the room were barricaded by some small crates, cargo pods, and whatever else the room had, and these makeshift defenses being manned by a knot of security guards. It was all very primitive, but the Admiral was convinced that nothing technological could be trusted... now.

Rosenzweig entered the room and the people at the table acknowledged him. Lt. Commander Ciufu was near the far end of the table, with Commander Zulkowski seated across from him, acting as Engineering liaison since Padovan was needed in Main Engineering. Alex sat down and opened his communicator. Chief Csuti sat across from him.

"Rosenzweig to bridge."

"Carlos here..."

"What's our status?" Alex asked.

"Still on course 317 mark 215," Maldonado said, "out into deep space, as per your orders."

"That will take us out of the Federation in about two hours," Ciufu indicated.

"I don't think that's a good idea..." Commander Zulkowski said.

"I will not go to any planets or bases with that thing aboard!" the Admiral said defiantly. "If it kills us, it kills us only; it won't go anywhere else."

"Aren't we here to stop this?" Ciufu asked.

"Yes..." Alex said, letting out a slight breath, "we are." He took a few seconds to compose himself and turned to the engineer.

"Zach, what's the full report on the intruder?"

"Whatever it is," Zachary began, "it disrupts electrical fields wherever it goes. I don't know whether it does it on purpose, instinctively, accidentally, whatever. We have been able to track it with a reasonable amount of success, but only by simply pinpointing the area where the most disruptions occur, and sending a security team there."

"Where is it now?" Csuti asked.

"That's just it," Zulkowski replied. "We don't know. The effect comes and goes. One minute it's in one part of the ship, the next minute, it's gone. Either it teleports from one part of the ship to another, or the disruptions occur when it wants them to. We tried using the flight recorders, but we can't override the authorization codes."

"It won't work anyway," the Admiral interjected. "It can disable them." He turned to Lt. Commander Ciufu. "How's the computer operating?"

"As normally as can be expected," Augie replied. "We have the basic functions, but no analytical or higher functions. Apparently Geordie has been making short work of our systems."

"As long as we get where we are supposed to be going..." Alex said.

"Why doesn't that thing kill us all at once?" Zulkowski said, a little frustrated.

"Don't give it any ideas..." Ciufu told him.

"Maybe it wants to kill us one by one," the Admiral said.

"Or a selected few," Bob Csuti added absently.

"Hmmm?" the Admiral inquired.

"Jankin, was Brocton's roommate," Csuti continued, "and there's a break-in in a storage bay near Engineering. Then this thing goes all the way forward to Sciences, to kill one man."

"With fifty people on duty at the time," Zulkowski added.

"Any one of whom could have been a target," Csuti followed.

A signal came over the Admiral's communicator.

"Admiral, this is George. I've got an analysis on the debris from the...uh...storage incident."

"What is it?"

"We had to stop the procedure when everything else occurred, but this is what we got. A standard molecular scan shows basically the obvious: that the material was torn apart by kinetic force. There were also traces of radiation, and somebody's DNA, but we will have to wait for other equipment to become available to..."

"Understood," Rosenzweig said. "I think we already know everything we need to."

"Sorry I couldn't be of any more help," Padovan replied.

"Don't worry about it," Rosenzweig said. "Out." He closed the communicator and replaced it. Then he looked at the others.

"Well...you heard him."

"It doesn't take a computer to figure out that the energy field we passed through yesterday has something to do with this," Commander Zulkowski said.

"Unfortunately, that doesn't tell us how to stop it," Alex replied. He shook his head. "If we could only predict its movements."

"I have been thinking about that," Bob Csuti said, "and I think I know who a possible target is."

Just then, they heard the sound of phaser fire out in the corridor.

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The Admiral flipped open his communicator. "Geordie, weren't you supposed to tracking the dammed thing?!"

"Sorry, sir," Commander Padovan responded. "It was right on top of you before I could do anything about it."

The four officers rushed to the door and saw the security guards fire on the creature, and got a good look at it for the first time. It was Lt. Brocton...somewhat, albeit a larger, distorted version, as though viewed in a funhouse mirror. Its uniform was torn, and a large percentage of its skin looked melted to the bone.

"It probably eats brains, too," Zach commented, as he and the other men pulled out their phasers and fired at it, as well.

"Not the time for levity, Commander," Alex retorted, *especially since I've got a gun in my hand.*

The added firepower seemed to be too much for it, and the creature was driven off...

For the time being.

The Admiral opened his communicator again. "Geordie! Where is he?!"

"About fifty meters from your present location," George answered, "and he seems to be staying put, too."

"Why?" Alex asked, bewildered.

"I don't know," George answered. "He seems to be attracted to you for some reason."

"Or to one of us," Ciufu said uncertainly.

A few minutes went by. Then the Admiral spoke. "Bob, you said before you think you know who the next target is...?"

The Security Chief nodded.

"Are you the next target?" Alex finally asked.

Csuti didn't say anything, but it was enough of an answer.

"Let's go, Bob," Alex ordered, with some sort of an idea forming in his head. "Augie, Zach, wait here."

Grabbing a somewhat reluctant Bob Csuti by the arm, he led the way into the corridor. They walked briskly aftward, arm in arm, and after a few minutes:

"George...is he following?"

"He's walking in your direction," George reported, "but not very quickly. He's about twenty seconds behind you."

"Keep me informed," Alex said, and closed the communicator.

"Alex, why are we doing this?" Bob asked weakly.

"Well you keep complaining we never do anything together."

"Funny..."

After a few more minutes of climbing and walking, they arrived at their destination, the cargo dock that led to the Avenger's starboard Hangar Bay. Rosenzweig released Csuti and opened his communicator again.

"George, what's the status on the power grid?"

"I have everything bypassed to life support and bridge systems."

"I'm going to need full uninterrupted power in Hangar Bay 2 and the corridor immediately forward of it for about...ten seconds."

"Are you kidding?"

"George!"

"Okay, I think I can reroute some battery power in your direction...just say when."

Alex heard a noise and spun around. He saw Csuti lying on the floor against the bulkhead, and the Brocton-thing silhouetted in what was left of the light...about ten feet away.

"Admiral?" George asked, over the communicator.

"Now."

Suddenly, it seemed that every light in the entire world came on, blinding the both of them. While Brocton stood there screaming and covering his eyes, Alex opened the cargo doors, grabbed Csuti, and jumped inside, dragging the unconscious Security Chief behind him.

Brocton's altered state was a monster, a murderous brute; but not even he could stand up against the suction that was created when Alex opened up the Hangar door. The ship listed, and Alex desperately tried to get himself and Csuti back into the corridor while the creature was dragged outside...into deep space, where it belonged.

Unfortunately, he couldn't see the energy of the storm leave the body before it exploded.

Epilogue

"Captain's Log, Stardate 9411.10:

We are heading back to Starbase 29 for some badly-needed repairs, and to transfer the remains of four crewmen to Graves Registration. With the intruder and its debilitating effects gone, Commander Padovan and his engineering crew were able to bring the computer back on line without any trouble. Dr. Fillmore reports that Lt. Commander Csuti suffered only a slight concussion, and will be recovering shortly. Please see attached addendum for commendations regarding Lt. Commander Robert Csuti, Lt. Alvin Jenkins, Ens. Lorraine Fitzgerald, Ens. Shenad...and Lt. Bruce Brocton. Rosenzweig out."

"Brocton, too?" Carlos asked, as he stepped off the turbo-lift.

"Don't speak ill of the dead," Alex replied, turning around in the center seat.

"Hard to believe, isn't it," Carlos said. "That storm somehow manifested itself and acted on every grudge Brocton carried, even to a slight reprimand from Bob Csuti."

"We all carry around emotional baggage, Commander," Alex replied; and with that, he got up and went into the turbo-lift, leaving Carlos on the Bridge.

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