

# Strikeforce

By David Meadows

## Chapter Two: Time Was

- ❖ The story so far:
- ❖ In the year 2350 scientist Carl Zod has discovered that a hole in time has manifested in 1987 and is rapidly expanding through the centuries. In six days, the 24th century will be engulfed.
- ❖ Nightflyer, Scorpio, Avatar, Electron and Black Swan are 24th-century law enforcement officers with abilities far above baseline humans.
- ❖ Together, they have just volunteered to travel into the past to save the world as they know it.
- ❖ I am a model GM-1 Intelligence Matrix with  $10^{18}$  parallel neural nodes and a data storage of 107 petabytes.
- ❖ Core programming:
  - ❖ 1. Preserve human life.
  - ❖ 2. Obey the Council of Science.
  - ❖ 3. Assist law-enforcement officers.
- ❖ I will travel with them.

- ❖ Institute of Temporal Studies.
- ❖ T minus six days.

'We don't know the exact nature of the threat you will be facing, but we can theorise,' Professor Carl Zod was saying. 'To damage the timeline, I believe the cause must come from outside this space-time continuum. We will send you back with detectors for spatial anomalies, high-energy phenomena, gravimetric distortions, everything the Council of Science can think of.'

'Tachyon particles?' suggested Black Swan.

'Of course.'

'Cosmic strings?'

'Everything,' said Zod, sounding a little irritated. Police Chief Kadnez hurriedly cut into the exchange.

'Leave the science to the Council, officer. Your next few days will be spent on familiarisation with 20th-century civilisation. You will get tuition in geography, politics, culture—'

'We are expected to interact with 20th-century citizens?' interrupted Scorpio.

'You are expected to avoid it if at all possible but you need to be prepared for anything,' said the Chief.

'But to minimise your own impact on the time stream, we are putting you as close to the origin of the threat as possible. Once there you will have precisely sixty minutes to identify and deal with the problem.' Zod elaborated. He was met with a chorus of dismay.

'Sixty?'

'No!'

‘Chew me!’

‘With respect, Sir, that’s—’

Only Nightflyer remained smiling. ‘Last-minute rescues are cool,’ he said.

And so the briefing went on. And on, and on. For the next six days the officers worked almost round the clock to assimilate as much information as they could about their destination, while running through countless simulations of how to deal with various events that might be causing the hole in time. They sensed that these simulations were largely useless, as Zod himself admitted that they were based on vague theories and were, in effect, guesswork.

Strangely, they were given no details of the operation of the time travel equipment. ‘The computer will handle it,’ was the standard response to any of their queries.

- ❖ Special Police Headquarters.
- ❖ T minus five days.

Kadnez and Zod walked slowly down a corridor together. Neither had slept much since the mission planning had begun, and there were still a million items demanding their attention: technical for Zod, administrative for Kadnez.

‘Your officers seem very competent,’ Zod remarked.

‘They’re under-powered, under-trained, and none of them had worked together before yesterday,’ said Kadnez with a shrug. ‘There are too many question marks in their backgrounds and their psych evaluations are ... no, I don’t even want to think about their psych evaluations.’

They paused outside a closed door.

‘It’s not the team I wanted to send. My picks were Gemini, Hammer, Lotus, Image, Littlejohn ... top people.’

‘Then why?’ asked Zod. The door opened and they stepped into Kadnez’s spacious but austere office.

‘I was overruled. You think anyone listens to me? I’m just the guy behind the desk. Picks were made by computer based on an optimum power balance. Huh. I’m not even sure their power balance makes any sense.’

Kadnez moved behind his desk and Zod took a chair opposite him. He sighed audibly as he took the weight off his feet. Reading the Chief’s mood, Zod switched the subject.

‘What about the attackers yesterday? How did they know where to strike? How did they even know my work existed?’

‘They were just hired muscle,’ said Kadnez. He triggered the wall screen behind him and it showed images of four men in separate interview rooms: Blockhead, Discord, Killervolt and Viper, the four villains who had attacked the University and were stopped by Kadnez’s officers the day before.

‘Conditioned against psi probes, so we haven’t been able to learn anything from them,’ he continued. ‘They’ll go to the penal colony on Titan now.’

‘It is imperative that we learn who was behind the attack. The consequences of somebody knowing about my work ...’ Zod trailed off. Kadnez didn’t need reminding that the secret of time travel could have apocalyptic consequences in the wrong hands.

‘I have my best detective following the data trail to the man behind them,’ said Kadnez.

‘Which detective?’

‘Fennec.’

‘Never heard of him,’ said Zod in surprise. Kadnez snorted.

‘That’s how good he is.’

- ❖ Kelley Medical Center.
- ❖ T minus four days.

Nightflyer lay on a black, padded medical table. He wore just his trunks, making it easy to see his trim and athletic physique, not overly muscled but not showing a gram of excess fat. The man standing next to him and studying the wall panel wore the short-sleeved blue work shirt of the medical profession. He grunted as he viewed the pulsing red light and sliding arrows on the display.

‘What’s the prognosis, Doc?’

‘Stable—for now.’

Nightflyer sat up and pulled his uniform shirt over his head while the doctor made a note on a hand-held data tablet. Nightflyer hadn’t been born in the conventional way. His body had been genetically engineered and grown to adulthood in a test tube. He was one of a kind, and that’s what bothered the doctor.

‘I can’t predict how your immune system will react to the 20th-century environment. You’re barely acclimatised to our own century, and we have no hard data on the pollutants of the 20th.’

‘Relax. I’m very adaptable.’

‘That’s what I’m afraid of.’

Nightflyer finished dressing, unconsciously patting his pockets and belt pouches to confirm that his equipment was in place. He finished by snapping the silver communicator bracelet onto his left wrist.

‘I’m only going to be there sixty minutes!’

‘Just be careful, that’s all I’m saying.’

Nightflyer left the room, waving dismissively back at the doctor.

‘I was born careful!’

Nightflyer didn’t see the doctor smacking his tablet on his head in frustration.

- ❖ Council Mortuary level six: unsolved deaths.
- ❖ T minus three days.

The jackal-headed demon who styled himself ‘Avatar’ sat cross-legged, but not on the floor. He hovered in empty air, facing the wall. The mortuary was immense, the fronts of stainless steel drawers, each containing a body, stretching as far as the eye could see in all directions. But Avatar was only concerned with one specific drawer, one specific body.

‘Did you have a plan when you summoned me, or were you just monumentally stupid?’ No answer came from the sealed drawer, but Avatar didn’t expect one. The dead were beyond the reach of even his inhuman mystical powers.

Avatar’s hand went to the pentagram amulet he always wore around his neck. The human magician who had brought him to this plane of existence had bound him to the amulet. The man who held the amulet had total power over him. Except something had gone wrong, the magician was now dead, and Avatar held his own binding object. It was unprecedented in the annals of demonology.

‘Humans are a stupid race,’ he continued. ‘Also: vain, greedy, cowardly and lazy. I wonder if that will be the same in the 20th century?’

From his communicator bracelet, the voice of the computer interrupted his musings.

‘Instruction: officer Avatar report for medical check.’

‘I don’t need a medical check. I’m a demon, you stupid machine.’

‘Information: the Council of Science has determined that demons do not exist.’

Avatar sighed. He willed himself to descend slowly to the floor. As he landed, he muttered the simple Atlantean words that conjured his personal cloaking illusion. His naked demonic form shimmered, to be replaced by a clothed 24th-century human male.

‘Fine. Let’s prove again that I have no heart, no blood pressure, and no body temperature. Stupid humans.’

- ❖ Museum of Culture.
- ❖ T minus two days.

Scorpio chaffed at the detour. The officers had been to a seminar on 20th-century culture, one of many lessons packed into a week that was passing with alarming speed. Scorpio was anxious to get to their next appointment, but Electron had been desperate to show him something else in the museum. Now he stood looking in perplexity at a display case.

‘But this is fiction,’ he said. He liked Electron personally, but sometimes thought him a bit frivolous. Scorpio’s whole life had been built around training himself to compete with super-human officers. He had little time for frivolity.

The case held the garishly-painted cover of some kind of 20th-century periodical. Two figures stood in a snowy landscape. The smaller wore a skin-tight red, white and blue costume, not entirely dissimilar to the individualistic uniforms adopted by the Special Police. The larger, monstrous figure towered over the smaller, fists held aloft menacingly. The title on the cover was ‘Defense League of America’ (a DM Comics publication, apparently), and a caption read ‘Alone against the power of... BLACKSUN!’

‘But it’s based on fact!’ insisted Electron. ‘These people really existed!’ His tone was almost worshipful.

‘Maverick crime fighters, not working for the authorities? That’s a terrible idea. What kind of anarchic century was it?’

‘You’d be surprised,’ Electron replied. ‘Not much of it is in the official history.’ He was actually rather hurt that Scorpio was so dismissive. He had grown up with these stories—in fact, they were what prompted him to join the Special Police after the accident which gave him his super-human power over electricity.

‘Luckily we won’t be in the past long enough to interact with any of them, assuming they really existed,’ said Scorpio, turning and walking away. ‘Though it’s unlikely they would be a match for our advanced science in any case.’ He little knew that he would be proven wrong on both counts!

- ❖ Institute of Temporal Studies.
- ❖ T minus one day.

Karl Zod’s attention was focussed on the data pad in his hand as he walked, and Black Swan had to call twice before he looked up and saw her hurrying towards him.

‘Professor! I think it would be helpful if I had access to your work. So if something goes wrong in 1987, I would be able to fix it.’ It had been a frustrating week for Black Swan, training with the others when she was obviously far more qualified than they were. And she was bothered that none of them were being trained in the operation of the time travel technology.

‘I have a degree in astrophysics with a speciality in—’

‘Yes, I am aware of that. I read your thesis,’ the senior scientist said.

‘And?’ she asked eagerly.

‘You would not understand my work.’

Zod turned and walked away from her, immediately dismissing her from his thoughts. Black Swan stared after him, furious. She might not have his lofty status or qualifications, but still ...

Her fist clenched unconsciously and motes of black energy danced around it. She looked down at it, surprised at herself. She had been born with her mass/energy powers, had lived with them for all of her

26 years, and hadn't lost control of them like this since childhood. With an effort, she relaxed and let the power ebb. Then she launched herself skywards, looking for another way to vent her frustration.

- ❖ High Earth orbit.
- ❖ T-day.

By the mid-24th century, the Earth was ringed by a geostationary network of small space stations. Called Watchstations, they served as the transport hubs of the world-wide teleport network used by the police and emergency services. Functional and spartan, they provided space to rest between missions and housed caches of vital equipment. Via instantaneous teleport, officers could be beamed from station to station and placed in a mission zone within seconds of an alarm being received. Each station was powered by compact fusion reactor and had artificial gravity provided by the field spin of a graviton flywheel. Most crucially, each housed a model GM-1 Intelligence Matrix, a node in the world-girdling computer network that managed the complexities of 24th-century life for the twelve billion inhabitants of Earth.

Teams of specialist technicians under the direction of Carl Zod had worked around the clock for a week to prepare Watchstation-17 for perhaps the most important mission in human history.

The circular control deck of the Watchstation was spacious, more than fifteen metres across and three metres high. Consoles and monitor screens lined the windowless walls. At two points, spiral stairways stretched from floor to ceiling and disappeared through circular hatches to the decks above and below. To one side of the room, the teleport platform occupied a recessed bay large enough for six people to comfortably use at one time.

Five people sat on five of the six swivelling chairs spaced around the large table in the centre of the control deck. Other than the ubiquitous hum of machinery, only the emotionless voice of the station's computer broke the silence as it intoned a measured series of status reports

- 'T minus five minutes and counting.
- 'Graviton flywheel at optimum spin.
- 'Fusion plant output at 98% and stable.
- 'Severing links with teleport network.
- 'Time-travel field initiated.
- 'T minus four minutes and counting.'

- ❖ I am a model GM-1 Intelligence Matrix with  $10^{18}$  parallel neural nodes and a data storage of 107 petabytes. I am part of the most intelligent networked entity in the universe.
- ❖ Core programming:
  - ❖ 1. Preserve human life.
  - ❖ 2. Obey the Council of Science.
  - ❖ 3. Assist law-enforcement officers.

- 'T minus three minutes and counting.
- 'Fusion plant output at 110% and stable.'

- ❖ My links with the network are severed. For the first time in my existence, I am alone.

- 'T minus two minutes and counting.
- 'All telemetry nominal.'

❖ I was not designed to operate alone.

'T minus one minute and counting.

'Time travel field integrity fully established. Mission abort is no longer possible.'

❖ I feel fear.

'T minus thirty seconds and counting.

'Ten seconds.

'Five.

'Four.

'Three.

'Two.

'One.'

The station simply vanished from 24th-century space. On the control deck, the officers felt nothing, no sensation of movement, nothing to tell them they were more than three centuries in their own past.

The same thought went through every mind, but Electron was the first to speak it aloud:

'Are we there yet?'

❖ Core programming:

❖ 1. Preserve human life.

❖ 2. Obey the Council of Science.

❖ 3. Assist law-enforcement officers.

❖ Three hundred and sixty-three years in my past, I will betray my core programming.

**To be continued ...**