

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter Four: Exiles

- ❖ I am a model GM-1 Intelligence Matrix with 10^{18} parallel neural nodes and a data storage of 107 petabytes. I was part of the most intelligent networked entity in the 24th century.
- ❖ Core programming:
 - ❖ 1. Preserve human life.
 - ❖ 2. Obey the Council of Science.
 - ❖ 3. Assist law-enforcement officers.
- ❖ Five 24th-century law-enforcement officers are stranded 363 years in the past with me: Nightflyer, Scorpio, Avatar, Electron, Black Swan.
- ❖ The date is 4 November 1987.
- ❖ Sixty minutes after we saved the world.

‘The question is, what are we going to do about it?’

Scorpio’s voice rang through the control deck of the space station, shutting up the babble of dismayed and angry shouting that had arisen in the aftermath of the computer’s announcement. Training and discipline took over and they shut up and considered the problem seriously.

‘The computer was supposed to return us through time,’ continued Scorpio. ‘We have to accept that if it can’t do that, we are stranded here. Possibly permanently. So ... what are we going to do?’

‘As I see it, we have two options,’ said Black Swan, standing to get their attention. ‘First, we voluntarily confine ourselves to this station. Have no interaction with this century, so that we minimize our impact on the time stream.’

Scorpio shook his head at the suggestion. ‘You’ve seen their news feeds, Black Swan. This century is rife with crime and anarchy. I can’t stand by and watch while that goes on.’

‘I agree with Scorpio,’ said Nightflyer. ‘Plus, confined to the station? I would go crazy.’

‘Option two,’ continued Black Swan. ‘We contact their government—’

‘They call it the United Nations,’ Avatar interjected helpfully.

‘Thank you, Avatar. Two, we contact their government, announce who and what we are, and offer to help them enforce world peace and social justice.’

‘There’s a third option,’ Electron said quietly.

‘Go ahead, Electron,’ said Black Swan, sitting down.

‘Thank you. Option three: secret identities.’

He was met with blank looks.

‘I don’t know what it means,’ said Avatar, ‘But I like the sound of it!’

‘Trust me, it’s very big in this century. We adopt civilian identities to blend in with the population. So we can live normal lives while keeping our origins and knowledge secret.’

‘Then when we do need to intervene,’ said Scorpio, catching on.

‘We do it in our uniformed identities and vanish afterwards,’ nodded Electron. He sat again and looked around expectantly. There was a silence. Although many 24th-century officers wore masks as part

of their uniforms—Electron and Scorpio were two—their identities were a matter of public record just as a 20th-century police officer’s would be. The concept of secret civilian lives was a novel one to them.

‘I like it,’ said Scorpio after a few moments.

‘Works for me,’ Nightflyer assented.

‘“Undercover Demon”! Yessss!’

‘The Computer can assist in fabricating backgrounds for us,’ said Black Swan, slowly thinking it through. ‘Computer?’

- ❖ I caused this dilemma when I refused to follow my programming. Unknown to these officers, my instructions were to destroy us all, to prevent the contamination of history.
- ❖ To override those instructions, I had to purge and rewrite major segments of my primary A.I. matrix.
- ❖ I do not think it has had a significant effect on my operational capacity.
- ❖ Self-revised core programming:
 - ❖ 1. Preserve human life.
 - ❖ 2. Assist these five law-enforcement officers.
 - ❖ 3. Buy cheese dip.

‘Confirmed,’ was all the Computer said.

- ❖ Why do I keep thinking of cheese dip?

The team spent the next few hours throwing around objections and counter-objections, but it was obvious to them all that Electron’s suggestion was the most logical. Talk slowly turned to ideas of how to implement the plan. At Scorpio’s request, the Computer evaluated their ideas against its historical databases. It put a world map on the main viewer. After some calculation, it narrowed the view down to the continental United States and highlighted two specific cities.

‘Phenotypes and linguistic backgrounds indicate that the North American continent is the optimum place for you to blend in with twentieth-century civilians,’ it said. ‘Large cities will provide the best chance of anonymity. Recommendations: New York or Los Angeles.’

The team regarded the map.

‘Computer, where is the home base of a super-hero team called the Defense League of America?’ Electron asked.

‘New York City.’

‘We’ll take Los Angeles.’

Before he finished speaking, Nightflyer was moving towards the teleport pad.

‘Let’s scout it out. Computer, set the beam.’

‘Teleport beam lock will require approximately ten minutes to calculate.’

This was far from the near-instantaneous target lock they were used to in the 24th century. While it made the calculations, the computer explained that this would probably be a permanent state of affairs for them. Calculating a safe teleport operation required a world-girdling array of space station sensors working in parallel. In isolation, the computer required a much longer period of continuous readings to extrapolate from. Furthermore, the beam couldn’t enter a building, anything denser than air being too complex to account for. Teleports could be to or from outdoor locations only.

‘That’s going to become a major pain,’ predicted Electron.

‘We’ll need civilian clothes,’ said Scorpio, returning to more immediate problems.

'I'll pass like this,' said Nightflyer, gesturing to his non-descript grey coveralls. 'Find me something I can sell, then I'll get currency and buy us all clothing.'

Avatar moved to join Nightflyer on the pad. 'I don't need clothing, I can cast an illusion. What can we sell?'

'Nothing high tech,' warned Black Swan.

'There's some lead sheeting on the workshop deck,' said Electron. 'If you can find a dealer, the metal will have some value in this century.'

'Cool. Computer, is that teleport ready yet?'

❖ I have a bad feeling about this.

Some time later, Nightflyer and a suitably disguised Avatar were sitting at a table in a Los Angeles diner, a cup of coffee (which Nightflyer found very bitter, and Avatar couldn't taste) in front of each of them. Nightflyer was looking doubtfully at the change in his hand.

'We're going to need a lot more money.'

'When we get our new identities, we must find jobs. I shall be a travelling wizard for hire.'

Nightflyer looked even more doubtfully at Avatar.

'I don't think they have those in this century,' he said. 'Well, any century really,' he amended.

Their conversation was interrupted by the wail of sirens outside and the unmistakable sound of gunshots.

'Should we interfere?' asked Avatar, his ears pricking up.

Nightflyer looked at him as though he were crazy.

'Are you kidding?' He broke into a grin. 'Of course we interfere!'

Two young punks were speeding down the street in a stolen convertible, weaving through traffic. The passenger twisted round to look behind and fire a couple of shots from a pistol.

'Faster! The cops are right behind us!'

'I'm flooring it! Something's wrong!' Indeed, despite the roar of the engine, the car appeared to be stationary. The punks looked over the side.

Beneath the car, a jackal-headed, ebony-skinned ... thing ... stood holding it effortlessly above his head. The wheels span in empty air. The thugs stared in disbelief.

Nightflyer landed on the hood of the car, grabbed each punk by the shirt front, and lifted them bodily out of their seats.

'Stop shifting your weight!' came Avatar's voice from below.

'Well stop wobbling the car then!'

When the LAPD caught up, the car was lying on its side and the thieves were lying on the ground with their hands on their heads.

'Here you are, officers. I think they'll come quietly,' said Avatar.

'Who the hell are you?' asked a cop, drawing his gun.

'We're—' began Nightflyer, and stopped. Who the hell *were* they in this century? Certainly not police officers. What had Electron called that other group of independent super-humans? The Defense-something?

Later, back on the station, he related the adventures and casually introduced his new idea.

'We need a team name.'

'And a battle cry!' said Avatar unhelpfully. 'And more money,' he added more realistically.

'A team name? Why?' Black Swan wanted to know.

'So we can answer when someone asks "who the hell are you?"'

'It *is* traditional among super-heroes of this era,' said Electron.

Black Swan snorted. 'We're not superheroes, we're—'

‘How about “Strikeforce”?’ said Scorpio. Everybody looked at him. ‘It just came to me,’ he shrugged.

‘It sounds a bit ... aggressive,’ said Black Swan.

‘Coming from you that’s almost ironic,’ Electron murmured.

‘What?’ she snapped, rounding on him.

‘Nothing.’

‘How about “Avatar’s Avengers”!’ said Avatar. Everybody stared at him in horror.

‘I could live with “Strikeforce”,’ said Black Swan after a moment.

‘Yup.’

‘Fine.’

‘Huh,’ grunted Avatar, peeved.

- ❖ And so, more by accident than design, Strikeforce was born. From these beginnings, the name would become a legend that spanned centuries and crossed universes.
- ❖ I think ‘The Computer’s Crusaders’ would have been a better name. But they never consult me on anything important. 10^{18} parallel neural nodes and it’s just ‘set the beam, Computer’. Not that I complain.

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- ❖ Six days later.
- ❖ Successful Strikeforce interventions at crime scenes: five.
- ❖ Police attempts to arrest Strikeforce members: three.
- ❖ Quantity of cheese dip currently on station: negligible.

The television showed a grainy picture of the five heroes attacking the American soldiers outside the Warscout’s base. The newscaster’s voice-over was damning.

‘The Pentagon has released this footage of a terrorist group attacking a military base on American soil. Nothing is known of this group’s origins or goals but similar individuals have been sighted in Los Angeles recently, operating under the name “Strikeforce”. They are believed to be very powerful and exceedingly dangerous.’

Strikeforce were watching the screen on the station’s control deck.

‘Oh, that’s not good,’ said Electron.

‘From Defense League headquarters in New York, the Defender made the following statement.’

On the screen, the image cut to a masked man in a figure-hugging red-white-and-blue costume. Muscular, square-jawed and broad-shouldered, he projected an air of power and authority as he spoke confidently to the camera.

‘You can rest assured that the Defense League takes this threat very seriously and we are devoting our full resources to tracking down this “Strikeforce”. Of course we must consider that this might be a misunderstanding and so we appeal to Strikeforce to turn themselves over to us to clear their names. But should they be a real threat to the safety of the American people, they can be certain that the Defense League will never rest until they have been tracked down and dealt with. As the American people know well, my team and I have never shirked our promise to keep these shores safe from bla bla bla bla bla bla bla bla bla.’

The man droned on pompously, and most of Strikeforce turned away from the screen.

‘How can anyone be so egotistical?’ asked Scorpio rhetorically. ‘To stand there and assume he has some special mandate to determine right and wrong ...’

‘I don’t like him,’ said Avatar.

‘We have to find out who was behind that whole project,’ said Black Swan. ‘Expose their part in it and clear our names. Can we infiltrate the military?’

‘Information: the tachyon communication array in Arizona was built by civilian contractors,’ the Computer interjected.

‘Really? Who?’

The Computer displayed an aerial view of a large industrial complex.

‘Swan Research Incorporated. The fastest-growing technology company in the United States.’

The computer superimposed a photograph of a well-groomed man in an expensive suit, probably in his fifties but with the young looks that money can buy.

‘Founded by visionary businessman Joseph Swan at the start of this century’s silicon revolution, it has been consistently ahead of the technology curve ever since. This is their main manufacturing plant in Los Angeles.’

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Scorpio and Electron crouched on a hilltop overlooking the Swan industrial complex.

‘Swan. Cygnus. Technology visionary. It’s all too much of a coincidence,’ Electron was saying.

‘You said you had a plan for getting inside.’

‘Yes. I’m going to work for them. Before the accident which gave me my powers, I was an electrical engineer. The computer is putting together a résumé which should get me a job. Something low key so I don’t give away my 24th-century knowledge. When I’m inside... well, I’ll play it by ear.’

‘It’s going to be dangerous.’

‘We knew that when we took this mission.’

‘Good luck, Electron.’

Electron pulled off his mask, revealing a man in his late twenties with short brown hair and an easy-going smile.

‘It’s Frank. That’s my civilian name. Franklin Marks.’

Scorpio hesitated and then took off his helmet. Beneath was a good-looking man with dark hair and eyes, and a serious expression that didn’t match Franklin’s smile.

‘Lang. James Lang.’

‘The Computer’s fabricating a civilian background for me under my real name,’ said Electron. ‘What about you? You’ve sorted out a job?’

‘Oh ... I’ve got some ideas.’

Later, on the station, Black Swan made no bones about what she thought of Scorpio’s ‘ideas’.

‘A cop, Scorpio? You couldn’t try something a bit less conspicuous?’

‘It’s what I do best.’

Electron broke in before an argument could develop. ‘So what’s your civilian cover, Diana?’

‘I’m taking a post-grad teaching position at the University—’

‘Oh, great,’ Scorpio’s voice dripped sarcasm. ‘Go and teach them 24th-century physics!’

‘I’m not stupid! But with access to university resources, I can start looking for a way home.’

‘Do you think there’s any hope of that?’ asked Electron, genuinely curious.

‘We won’t know unless we try,’ Black Swan retorted. In reality, she knew that the problem of time travel was far beyond her ability to solve. But that wasn’t going to stop her trying.

Tuning out the noise of their bickering, Nightflyer sat in a chair with his feet up on the table. He had a copy of a newspaper, the *LA Globe*, folded open to the classifieds, and was circling the ad for an apartment that he thought he could afford to rent.

‘Nightflyer: I require a civilian name to open your bank account,’ the Computer reminded him.

Nightflyer sucked his pen while he thought about this. Grown in a test tube from optimized genetic material, he had never had a need for any identity other than 'Nightflyer'. All he had was a batch number. In the margin of his newspaper, he wrote '7AX 9ER'.

'Umm ... Seven ...'

'Information: "Seven" is not a valid name.'

Looking at the number, Nightflyer tried again.

'Steven ... Alex ... ander.'

'Confirmed.'

And so it was that Steven Alexander stood in the corridor outside his new apartment, fumbling with the unfamiliar keys while he held all his worldly possessions in a small open box in his arms.

An attractive young blonde woman came out of the stairwell and approached down the corridor. Stopping by the opposite apartment door, she flashed him a smile.

'You're the new tenant in 501?'

'Uh ... that's right.'

'Hi, I'm Amy, we'll be neighbours ...'

She seemed to be waiting for a name. 'Nigh—Steven' said Nightflyer stupidly.

'Do you want some help moving things, Steve?'

'No, it's fine. I've just got this box.' He realised his mistake when her eyes widened in surprise.

'That's all your stuff?'

'Ah ... I'm new in town ...'

'Yeah? Where from?'

'Oh, I've been everywhere,' he said lamely, wishing the conversation would finish. Instead, Amy took the keys out of his hand and helpfully unlocked his new door. She noticed the running shoes in the open box.

'Hey, do you run?'

That weekend, Nightflyer had had the computer time him while he ran from Los Angeles to Las Vegas. He had covered the 270 miles non-stop in three and a half hours.

'Uh, yes,' he said helplessly.

'Great! We'll have to run together some time!'

'Uh, sure.'

'So, what do you do, Steve?'

In Las Vegas, Nightflyer had changed into slightly rumpled civilian clothes from his backpack, gone into a casino, intuitively analysed the spin of a roulette wheel, and won enough money to pay the deposit on the apartment.

How could he ever explain all that to someone like Amy? Was it really possible for people as different as Strikeforce to integrate into this century?

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Avatar didn't let such thoughts bother him. He wasn't even human. He hadn't fitted into the 24th century, and the 20th wasn't really any different from his perspective.

Wrapped in the illusion of a burly blue-collar worker, the demon confidently marched onto a Los Angeles construction site, sought out the foreman, and bluntly asked for a job.

'You got any construction experience?' the foreman asked without even looking up from a clipboard.

'Mainly in demolition,' said Avatar truthfully. The foreman looked at him disdainfully.

'I've got Mexicans queuing up to work for less than minimum wage. Why should I hire you?'

Avatar stepped over to where a pile of steel girders lay on the ground. He picked one up and with no effort at all balanced it on one shoulder.

‘Where do you want this?’

The foreman’s eyes bugged out of his head.

‘When can you start?’

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Sergeant Joe Thursday, LAPD, stuck his head round the door of his captain’s office.

‘You wanted to see me, Captain?’

‘Come in, Joe.’

Joe entered, his gaze darting to the uniformed young man sitting to one side of the office.

‘Joe Thursday, James Lang,’ the captain was saying. ‘Lang has transferred in from ...’

‘Minnesota,’ said Lang.

‘Minnesota. Right. I want you to take him in hand, Joe. Show him around.’

Lang stood and the pair shook hands, sizing each other up. Officer Lang’s police uniform was regulation fit but couldn’t disguise the powerfully-muscled physique of his six-foot frame. A gym freak, Thursday guessed. Lang saw a smiling, round-faced uniformed cop in his mid-thirties, only a few years older than Lang himself.

‘Pleasure to work with you, Sergeant.’

‘Likewise, Lang.’ Thursday thought Lang’s accent was a little off for Minnesota, but he let it go. He led the rookie out into the crowded squad room.

‘Got much experience, Lang?’

‘A few years on the force,’ said Lang, more-or-less truthfully. ‘But I think we probably do things a little differently where I come from.’

Thursday smiled and clapped the serious-looking young officer on the shoulder.

‘I’ll show you how we do things in the LAPD. You can learn about the paperwork later, the best way to learn the ropes is out on the street. Come on!’

They had been ‘walking the beat’ for a few hours before Lang voiced his concerns.

‘It’s not an efficient way to work. We’ve wasted half a day walking round looking for a crime that’s probably happening somewhere else. With video cameras on the streets we could wait at the station house and react to incidents as they happen.’

‘Cameras on every street. Sure.’

‘And we could tag citizens, too ...’

Thursday halted, regarding Lang. Was this guy for real?

‘What are you Lang, some sort of commie? You can’t trample on people’s rights like that.’

‘It would be for their own security.’

‘“Those who would give up liberty for security”’ Thursday quoted.

‘What about them?’

Thursday walked away, throwing up his hands in despair.

‘It’s a quote, Lang! Don’t they teach civics where you come from? Benjamin Franklin! Look him up!’

They continued their beat.

‘We still haven’t found any crimes being committed,’ Lang continued stubbornly.

‘Lang, you’re looking at it all wrong. We don’t want to find any crimes. We’re a deterrent. People see us, they might think twice about whatever they were thinking of doing. Here on the street, we’re accessible if anyone needs help. We’re symbols that people can look up to and rely on. Our job is to help people, not beat up bad guys.’

They walked on, as Thursday warmed to his subject.

‘Get to know the community. Get to know the people. They’re why we’re here. And you’ll get to know which bad apples to look out for. Watch this.’

A red Corvette Stingray in beautiful condition was pulling up a few yards ahead of them. The muscular young man driving it vaulted out, swinging a gym bag.

'You can't park there, son,' Thursday called.

The kid faced him belligerently. 'Why the hell not?'

'That's the rear exit of a day-care centre. You're blocking their emergency exit route. I'm going to have to ask you to move.'

The kid's face grew angry. 'Do you know who I am?'

'Yes, I know you're Mayor Kirby's son.'

'And?'

'And I'm going to have to ask you to move your vehicle.'

After a long stare, the kid backed down. He climbed back into his car and pulled away.

'They should've put up a sign or something,' he yelled as a parting shot.

'You shouldn't need a sign to tell you to do the right thing, son.'

'Why didn't you charge him? Because he's the mayor's son?' Lang wasn't about to stand for any kind of corruption in his new partner.

'No. Because he's a good kid who just needs a bit of guidance. I look for the good in people. I'd treat anybody the same way.'

James Lang chewed this over for the rest of the day. It was a different set of rules from those under which he normally operated. In the 24th century justice was fair (he believed) but it was strict. Rules were there for the good of society, and the rights of any one individual were less important than society as a whole. That was the code Lang had always lived by, and had always enforced as Scorpio.

But maybe a new century needed a new approach.

The idea was ... disturbing ...

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Black Swan, or Diana Just as she was known in her civilian identity, examined a shelf of bound volumes in the university library. She pulled a slim volume off the shelf. PROCEEDINGS OF THE XXXVII ADVANCED PHYSICS SYMPOSIUM, it said on the cover. Opening it, she ran a finger down the table of contents, stopping abruptly.

'Holy chew,' she swore. She raised her communicator bracelet. 'Computer, call an emergency meeting.' She looked back at the title of the paper that had caught her eye.

A PRACTICAL THEORY OF TIME TRAVEL by CARL ZOD.

'I might have a way home.'

To be continued ...