

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter Five: Villains

A beam of white light flashed down from the heavens and struck the roof of a tall, modern apartment building, where it resolved into the costumed forms of Avatar, Black Swan, Electron, Nightflyer and Scorpio, collectively known as Strikeforce.

- ❖ San Francisco. 17 November 1987. The apartment building of Professor Carl Zod.
- ❖ Zod appears to be this century's leading expert on time travel.
- ❖ In the 24th century, Karl Zod sent Strikeforce back in time to this century.
- ❖ I cannot compute the probability of this being a coincidence.

'Information: subject is on the top floor of this structure,' announced the Computer from their communications bracelets. Without further discussion, the team moved to the service door and made their way down into the building.

On a nearby roof, an observer followed this activity with great interest through a pair of compact but powerful binoculars. Over the breast pocket of his form-fitting blue coveralls was a patch with a stylized logo in the shape of a cube, with three visible faces showing patterns of dots. Over the coveralls he wore an unzipped leather flying jacket, sporting a silver pin in the shape of a pair of wings. At his waist he wore a holstered pistol of unconventional design.

He lowered the binoculars and replaced them with mirrored aviator sunglasses, then spoke into a small radio clipped to the collar of his coveralls.

'This is Don. The tip-off was right. I don't have a positive I.D. but I think it's Strikeforce. Move in but keep out of sight until my signal.'

Inside the building, Strikeforce had stopped at the apartment door indicated by the Computer. Black Swan knocked. After a moment, a woman opened it. Behind her glasses, her eyes widened with surprise when she saw the outlandish outfits of her visitors. She was a slim brunette in her late 20s, definitely not the man Black Swan was expecting to see.

'We're looking for Professor Carl Zod,' said Black Swan.

'Please don't be alarmed. We just need to talk to him,' added Scorpio.

From within the large, luxurious penthouse apartment, a male voice with a hint of a European accent called out, 'Who is it, Carla?'

'I ... really don't know,' answered the woman slowly.

Nightflyer gave her a friendly smile.

'We're Strikeforce. Perhaps you've heard of us?'

'Aren't you terrorists?' she asked. She didn't sound afraid; merely curious.

'Reports of our terrorism have been greatly exaggerated,' explained Avatar. He also smiled, his rows of gleaming, pointed teeth not quite having the reassuring effect he was aiming for.

'Don't stand with the door open! Bring them in!' came the voice from within the apartment.

The woman called Carla hesitated. 'If you're here to harm my father,' she said.

'I assure you we have no such intentions,' said Scorpio.

With obvious reluctance, she stood aside and they entered, giving Professor Carl Zod his first look at his visitors.

‘Oh my goodness,’ he said. He removed his glasses and carefully polished them. ‘Oh my goodness,’ he said again, after replacing them.

But if Strikeforce were hoping to find the Karl Zod they knew from the 24th century, they were disappointed. Whatever cosmic coincidence had led to the similarity of names ended there. This frail, old academic looked nothing like the robust, assertive member of the Council of Science who had knowingly sent them on a one-way trip three centuries back through time.

‘Good morning, Professor Zod,’ Black Swan said. ‘We don’t mean to alarm you, but we are in desperate need of help that I believe only you can give. Will you please hear us out?’

‘Me? I don’t see how—well yes, of course, I can’t refuse such an intriguing—but—but—’

‘Why don’t you tell us what you need?’ Carla Zod interjected.

‘It’s a long story,’ admitted Electron.

‘Then I had better put on a pot of coffee,’ she replied, unperturbed. Electron admired the nonsense way she taken their appearance in her stride.

Strikeforce had debated this meeting at length before putting their course of action to a vote. They had agreed that if there was even the slightest chance that Zod could help them then they could hold nothing back, they had to give him their full story, including details of the 24th century that they had previously sworn to keep secret. So after introductions were made, they began at the beginning and told their hosts everything. The reason for their mission, the time jump, the betrayal that had stranded them in the past. The telling took a long time. Black Swan, seated in the centre of the Zods’ large couch, did most of the talking, regularly interrupted by the others as they sought to clarify or add to some point.

Zod listened in silence. Carla perched on the arm of her father’s chair and listened just as intently, occasionally interrupting with a pertinent question. When the story was over, Zod leaned forward in his chair, his eyes shining.

‘This is so exciting! Do you know what this means? Carla, it vindicates all of my theories!’

Black Swan held out a small data cartridge.

‘This is all the data we have on the time-travel process. It’s not much, but—’

Zod looked at it blankly. ‘But what is this? We don’t have such devices.’

Black Swan mentally cursed herself. She should have thought to transfer the data to 20th-century computer media!

Carla Zod, however, was reaching for the cartridge, pushing her glasses up on to her head while she examined it closely. ‘Fascinating. What technology are you using?’

To Black Swan’s irritation, the Computer used her communicator bracelet to project a hologram of data storage schematics and answer Carla’s question.

‘Data is stored in an optical matrix and processing is performed by—’

‘Massively parallel quantum events! Yes, I see!’

Electron and Scorpio exchanged significant looks. While her father looked befuddled at the schematics, Carla appeared to grasp them instantly.

- ❖ Searching ... Carla Zod: doctorate from MIT and several published papers in different areas of experimental physics.
- ❖ Interesting.
- ❖ I shall not inform Strikeforce of this fact. I do not wish to appear a know-it-all.

Black Swan was ignoring the digression, however, and still addressing the elder Zod.

‘Professor Zod, can you help us? We think you’re the only man who can.’

‘No, no, it is quite impossible. My theory shows that time travel is only possible as a one-way event.’

Nightflyer, standing behind the couch that Scorpio, Black Swan and Electron were sitting on, had largely ignored the conversation and now glanced around the room with a puzzled expression.

‘There are chroanal energy levels, you see,’ Zod was continuing, ‘And according to my theory you have dropped to a lower level and the inertia of that level is too great to overcome. You can go further back, never forwards.’

Nightflyer couldn’t see anything obviously wrong but was growing more uneasy.

‘Guys ...’ he said quietly.

‘But Papa, you overlooked the secondary solution to—’ Carla was saying.

‘Guys!’ repeated Nightflyer more insistently. He couldn’t say what was wrong, but his brain was hardwired to process cues that his conscious mind missed, and when he got one of his intuitive ‘hunches’, he always trusted it.

‘Down!’ he shouted. He vaulted over the couch and crashed into the chair that the Zods shared, knocking it and them over backwards.

An instant later, one entire wall of the room exploded inwards, showering the surprised Strikeforce members in concrete and glass. Three figures flew in through the gaping hole in the side of the building.

- ❖ Searching ... assailants are known to American law-enforcement agencies.
- ❖ Neutron: 2.75 metres tall; superhuman strength; ability to fly and project energy blasts.
- ❖ The Dragon: master of eastern martial arts; protected by a force-field generated by the belt he wears.
- ❖ Greywolf: wears a full-body suit constructed of advanced armour.
- ❖ Collectively members of terrorist group, “The Anarchists”.
- ❖ I shall inform Strikeforce of these facts.
- ❖ Assuming they survive.

The flying, nine-foot-tall giant carried the other two effortlessly, one in each hand.

‘I told you Zod would be guarded,’ said the armoured man as he took in the scene.

‘I was expecting DICE agents, not supers!’ his partner answered.

But despite their banter, the three were a well-oiled team and moved smoothly into action against the dazed Strikeforce members.

Neutron dropped his passengers and continued his flight to smash solidly into Avatar like a battering ram, the impact driving the demon back into the apartment’s far wall. The stunned Avatar was unable to defend himself and in no fit shape to mount a counter-attack as Neutron’s fists pummelled him with a strength that would crush a normal man.

The Dragon leaped in front of Scorpio and attacked with a flurry of skilled blows. Only Scorpio’s lightweight body armour and helmet kept him from serious harm, allowing him to recover his equilibrium and counter-attack. The two circled each other, evenly matched.

Greywolf dropped to the ground and strode to where the Zods had some temporary safety behind the upturned armchair. Nightflyer somersaulted out to face him, but his kick seemed to barely faze Greywolf through his heavy armour. From the villain’s forearms, sets of long, razor-sharp claws popped out. Nightflyer dodged a swing at his head but Greywolf’s other hand scored a body blow, the claws going deep. Despite the injury, Nightflyer managed to throw Greywolf to the ground with a judo move, and attempted to pin him there.

Black Swan and Electron had taken the brunt of the blast when the wall exploded, and Black Swan was slow in getting to her feet. This meant she was ignored by the three villains, and was in a position to see what else was coming through the hole.

‘Oh, chew!’ she swore.

She had seen a fourth assailant arcing towards the building.

- ❖ Searching ...
- ❖ Cosmos: massive superhuman strength; resistance to injury; ability to project blasts of powerful radiation; vastly increased mass; able to leap dozens of metres.
- ❖ One of the most destructive entities on 20th-century Earth.
- ❖ I have a bad feeling about this.

It was a monster of a man. Not as tall as Neutron, but wide, heavy, and massively muscled, his brief trunks revealing a skin that appeared to be a dull grey metal. Rather than flying in, he appeared to be at the end of the arc of a gigantic leap. Black Swan raised both arms and blasted him with dark energy, but it splashed harmlessly off his solid chest.

‘Get the civilians out of here,’ she managed to shout before he landed—and what a landing! Such was his mass and power that the entire floor bucked and collapsed, sending heroes and villains alike tumbling down to the floor below.

But Black Swan’s warning had been in time. Electron was already diving towards the Zods when the floor went, and his hands reached out, one grasping Carla by the wrist, the other flailing towards her father.

Electron didn’t have time for anything fancy like a telekinetic shield. He had to get the Zods out of the collapsing apartment instantly. He used a power he rarely relied on because it was inherently dangerous to himself and his passengers: he teleported.

A fraction of a second before they vanished, Neutron grabbed Zod and tore him from Electron’s grasp. Instantly, he turned and streaked from the building with his victim, leaving the other Anarchists to fend for themselves.

Avatar and Black Swan flew in pursuit. Avatar, faster than Black Swan, was within inches of grabbing Neutron’s ankle, when a new assailant appeared out of nowhere.

It was a teenage girl with long, straight hair and a flowing cape. She hovered in the air with a ghost-like appearance: pure white, translucent, almost insubstantial.

She raised one hand in a complicated gesture and spoke a string of syllables that Avatar recognised as Atlantean. Pure white energy streamed from her fingertips and struck Avatar like a battering ram, knocking him down and away from Neutron.

Black Swan ignored this and continued on. It wasn’t clear whether she could catch Neutron, but the point soon became moot as the sixth and final Anarchist flew into view, sitting astride a flying platform as if it were a motorcycle.

- ❖ Searching ...
- ❖ Skyrider: rides an experimental flying vehicle designated “sky-cycle”.

The sky-cycle fired bursts of glowing red plasma at Black Swan. The plasma bolts struck her solidly, and despite her partial invulnerability they hurt!

Furious, she pirouetted in the air and aimed a blast of her own at the cycle, blowing it to shrapnel and throwing Skyrider clear.

Black Swan turned to look for Neutron, but a shout distracted her.

‘Black Swan!’ Scorpio stood in the gaping hole in the ruined building and pointed downwards at the helplessly falling Skyrider. The sidewalk was dozens of stories below, and he was clearly unable to fly under his own power. ‘Man down!’

Black Swan hesitated, but only for a second. Then she used her own power of teleportation to arrive in the air below the plunging man, allowing him to drop into her waiting arms.

Looking up, she saw that Neutron, with the captive professor, was too far away to catch and would soon be lost among the city's skyscrapers. 'This team needs to have a talk about priorities,' she muttered darkly.

Scorpio turned his attention to where, from his perspective, Avatar was behaving most strangely.

'Avatar! We need you in here.'

'Let me deal with her, first,' the Demon answered.

The ghostly girl was pressing her mystical attack, forcing Avatar to use shielding incantations to keep her at bay.

- ❖ The Council of Science has determined that magic does not exist.
- ❖ But they said the same thing about demons.
- ❖ And look at Avatar.

Scorpio looked at Avatar blankly.

'Deal with ... who?' he asked.

To his eyes, Avatar was alone in the skies.

While this played out, Nightflyer was left in the wrecked building, fighting Cosmos, the Dragon and Greywolf alone. His costume was soaked with his own blood, but his rapid cellular regeneration had already closed the wounds and he fought on like a man possessed. Using Cosmos's head as a vaulting horse, he nailed the Dragon with a sweeping kick to the head.

'Less talk more fighting, Scorpio?' he yelled.

'I'm trying to organise tactics,' came Scorpio's retort. 'Where's Electron?'

'Fine, talk. I'll fight them all,' said Nightflyer sarcastically while ducking under Cosmo's ponderously swinging arm.

And where *was* Electron?

Electron's teleport power was short range, especially with a passenger, and he and Carla Zod had materialised in a nearby apartment, close enough to hear the crash of battle but hopefully far enough to keep Carla from being a collateral victim.

'What was that?' Carla asked incredulously.

'Teleportation. I convert matter to electrical impulses and—'

Carla looked sceptical. 'Impossible. The number of particle interactions ...'

'And yet, here we are! Look, Ms. Zod, I'm going back for your father but I can't teleport blind into combat. You wait here and figure out particle interactions. I'll—' He opened the door, stepped into the corridor, and stopped dead. '—Walk out into a whole heap of trouble!' he concluded.

Facing him was a whole posse of armed men.

- ❖ I am a model GM-1 Intelligence Matrix with 10^{18} parallel neural nodes and a data storage of 107 petabytes. Core programming: assist these officers as they try to be 'heroes' to the people of this century.
- ❖ With the world generally believing them to be terrorists, that is not always easy.

'Federal agents! You're under arrest!' Don barked.

To be continued ...