

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter Six: Killers

- ❖ San Francisco. 17 November 1987. The apartment building of Professor Carl Zod.
- ❖ Strikeforce are in the process of being beaten by a team of super-villains.
- ❖ Or possibly arrested by the authorities.
- ❖ It is unclear which outcome will be worse.

Electron held up his hands in the universal gesture of ‘surrender’.

Facing him down the length of the corridor was a team of armed men in paramilitary uniforms. Electron’s 24th-century knowledge told him that the weapons they covered him with were high-powered plasma pistols. Not standard weaponry for this century, and not something he was confident about surviving a hit from. Their leader had declared himself as a government agent, though, so maybe this was something Electron could talk his way out of. And fast, because he could still hear the sounds of battle from elsewhere in the apartment building.

‘There has been a misunderstanding—’

‘On the floor. Now!’ barked the lead agent, in a tone which suggested he wouldn’t repeat the instruction.

To Electron’s considerable surprise, Carla Zod stepped out of the room he had left her in, and pushed in front of him.

‘Stop! This isn’t the villain!’

Aggravating woman, thought Electron. What was the point in teleporting her away from the bad guys if she was then going to step in front of a squad of gun men?

‘He’s a wanted terrorist, ma’am,’ explained the agent calmly. His pistol aim didn’t waver an inch.

‘He just saved my life!’

‘It’s true, I did,’ said Electron.

A particularly loud explosion made the floor of the corridor tremble. Everybody involuntarily looked off to the side, where the sounds of a super-powered battle showed no sign of abating.

‘That’s my team fighting the real bad guys. Are you going to let me go and help them?’

After a long, tense moment, the agent lowered his weapon and signalled to his team to do the same. Electron took off at a run down the corridor.

‘Sir!’ one of the agents protested.

‘I know, I’ll take full responsibility. Doctor Zod, We’re with the Department of Intelligence and Counter-Espionage. We had a tip-off about a kidnapping attempt.’

Carla arched an eyebrow. ‘I think I can verify your tip-off, agent. But you seem to be a little late.’

*

Electron rounded a corner of the corridor and stopped short. Beneath his mask, his mouth gaped open.

‘Holy chew!’

He was looking into what was once the Zod's penthouse apartment—and the apartments below, and those next door. The whole corner of the building's top few floors had collapsed and left an enormous, rubble-filled hole in the structure. There was no sign of the villains, only Electron's team-mates picking themselves up out of the rubble. The fight was over, and Strikeforce didn't seem to be the winners.

Electron helped Scorpio to his feet. 'Professor Zod?' he asked.

Scorpio shook his head. 'They got him. But Black Swan got one of theirs.'

'I put him down on the sidewalk,' said Black Swan.

'And?' asked Scorpio.

Black Swan crossed her arms and started at Scorpio belligerently 'You told me to save him, not capture him.'

The agents of DICE chose that moment to enter the scene. Carla Zod had tagged along but was being held back, and screened, by a pair of agents.

'What the hell happened here?' asked the lead agent.

Strikeforce tensed. 'Who...?' began Scorpio.

'Government agents,' said Electron quickly, not wanting another fight to break out, particularly when Carla might be in the line of fire.

'Great,' said Scorpio. Electing himself spokesman, he walked slowly over to the agents. They had guns out but not pointing directly at him, and he was careful to keep his movements non-threatening. Face-to-face with the lead agent, he glanced at the 'dice' icon and name tag on his breast.

'Agent ... Don, an attempt was made to kidnap this woman and her father. We were innocent bystanders, and—'

'Skip it, Doctor Zod vouches for you. I need to know who attacked and where they went with the professor.'

While Don and Scorpio conversed, Carla moved over to Nightflyer.

'I'm afraid we lost your father, Ms. Zod. But we'll do everything in our power to find him,' Nightflyer said.

Before she could answer, Electron moved over and interjected, 'But we need to ensure your safety, too. We have a secure headquarters—'

'Electron!' snapped Black Swan. 'A word?'

Pulling her team-mate to one side, Black Swan hissed in his ear. 'Are you insane? We can't take her to the station!'

'Where else can we keep her safe from super-human kidnapers?'

'We don't know they'll try to strike at her!'

'We don't know they won't!'

Oblivious to these human interactions, Avatar had been scanning the horizon through the ruined side of the building. His mind was on the insubstantial, ghost-like woman he had seen. She had wielded magic as powerful as his own, but it appeared that she had been invisible to everybody except him. Which suggested an astral projection, more powerful magic. And as soon as her team-mates had retreated from the building, she too had disappeared.

'Shouldn't we move while the trail is hot?' Avatar asked the room in general.

'What trail?' asked Black Swan. 'They were flying!'

After his hurried conversation with Don, Scorpio addressed the rest of his team.

'All right, here's the plan. I'm going with this agent for debriefing ...'

'No way!' said Nightflyer.

'Yes, I am. The rest of you, get to work on finding the missing professor. I'll check in periodically.'

Don turned to Carla. Doctor Zod, I'd like to take you into protective custody until—'

'No need, agent, I'm going with Strikeforce.'

'Oh no you're not,' said Black Swan.

'Oh yes she is,' said Electron and Nightflyer in an unpremeditated duet.

'I would strongly advise against that, Doctor,' said Don. He felt the situation was rapidly slipping out of his control.

'Oh, well, if you put it like that,' said Carla sweetly.

❖ Strikeforce space station: control deck

In the recessed teleport booth, a glowing halo outlined the figures of Black Swan, Electron, Nightflyer, Avatar and Carla Zod. The halo vanished, and the four Strikeforce members stepped clear of the booth. Carla remained rooted to the spot.

'Oh ... my ... God!'

'You get used to it,' said Nightflyer with a grin.

'Computer, this is Carla Zod,' said Electron. 'Register her biometrics and accept her commands.'

'Confirmed.'

'Countermanded! She doesn't get access to station systems,' snapped Black Swan. She was still fuming at being overruled in what was serious breach of everything they had agreed about how they would deal with this century.

'Confirmed.'

❖ Sometimes I worry that Strikeforce do not know what they are doing. Lucky for them they have me to keep track of things.
❖ Information to self: 'luck' is illogical.

Carla was staring at the array of consoles lining the command deck. If what Strikeforce had told her was true, they had teleported 22,000 miles to a cloaked space station in orbit above the Earth. It was a lot to process.

'Come with me, Ms. Zod,' said Electron, breaking into her reverie.

'Doctor Zod,' said Carla automatically. 'But call me Carla.'

'Carla ... I'll show you the facilities.' He led her to one of the two spiral stairways that pierced the deck, and started down. 'There are six decks. Living quarters are directly below this one.'

'Right. We'll get on with the work then,' said Black Swan sarcastically to his retreating back.

'Computer, replay all recordings from the fight. Multi-spectrum analysis.'

'Confirmed.'

❖ Department of Intelligence and Counter-Espionage regional headquarters, San Francisco.

Major Harry Eastwood sat behind a desk piled with paperwork in such a disarray that one might suspect he never actually did any paperwork. The un-holstered blaster lying on top of the papers gave a better picture of what kind of leader he was.

A few minutes ago, he had been warned that his top field agent, Don Newman, had returned in the company of a man matching the description of Strikeforce's Scorpio. He grinned as Don and Scorpio entered his office.

'You're bringing armed terrorists onto the base now, Don?'

Scorpio saw a tough-looking man in his 50s, wearing the same uniform as Don. Eastwood reclined casually in his chair, grinning around a foul-smelling cigar. But Scorpio also saw the keenly intelligent look in Eastwood's eye, saw the tensed muscles, and mentally measured the distance to the blaster. If Scorpio tried to go for his own weapon, he calculated that he wouldn't have a chance. But that wasn't why he was here, of course.

‘We are not terrorists,’ he said.

‘This is Scorpio,’ said Don, unnecessarily. ‘He represents Strikeforce. Scorpio, this is Major Harry Eastwood, DICE regional commander.’

‘That’s the Department of Intelligence and Counter-Espionage. We’re the guys who keep you guys in check.’ Eastwood had pointedly not stood up or offered any kind of greeting. His eyes didn’t waver from Scorpio’s. ‘Now tell me about the people you fought.’

*

On their tour of the Strikeforce station, Electron had saved the observation deck for last. Situated at the top of the station, the transparent dome offered a panoramic view of the stars. Due to the orientation of the station, the Earth was below them, out of sight, but Carla seemed transfixed by the stars.

‘I don’t know why they would target my father,’ she was saying, not taking her eyes off the view. ‘We have money, but we’re not actually rich.’

‘For his knowledge, maybe?’ guessed Electron.

‘My father is a brilliant theorist, but ...’ She stopped, and looked at Electron. ‘He couldn’t actually make a time machine.’

‘Could you?’

Carla looked back at the stars and was silent for a long time. When she finally spoke, it was so softly that Electron barely heard her.

‘Maybe.’

*

Back in the DICE base, Eastwood stood with Don and Scorpio and indicated a wall monitor which displayed pictures of Neutron, Dragon, Greywolf, Cosmos and Sky rider.

‘They call themselves Anarchists. These are just the tip of the iceberg, the super-powered muscle of a massive global conspiracy. They’ve got fingers in every crooked activity. There could be a hundred reasons for them kidnapping the professor.’

‘Do you have any leads that would help us find them?’ asked Scorpio.

‘If we did, we’d be following them already,’ said Don.

‘Well,’ said Eastwood, drawing out the word slowly, ‘There is one thing ...’

*

On the space station control deck, Nightflyer, Black Swan and Avatar looked at an image of Cosmos surrounded by an orange glow.

‘See? The big one gives off a cosmic energy signature,’ Black Swan explained. ‘We have portable detectors that will track it.’

Before she had even finished her sentence, Nightflyer was on the teleport pad.

‘Great, grab the whatevers and meet me down there.’

A few minutes later, Nightflyer and Avatar were on the ground and walking up the steps towards a tall building in San Francisco. From the trajectory of Cosmos’s leap, Black Swan had calculated that this was the building he had probably started from. From the steps, Nightflyer could see the top of the Zod’s apartment building, the destruction of the upper floors clearly visible.

Aware that they were still considered terrorists, and with the area now swarming with police and emergency services, Nightflyer had suggested they wore disguises. Avatar had obliged with magical illusions of white coveralls, complete with hoods, breathing masks and conspicuous radiation symbols. Avatar’s demonic features were also disguised to look human. But Nightflyer was acutely aware of the attention they were attracting.

'The disguises were supposed to be discrete.'

'You said "suitable", not "discrete"!'

'I meant suitably discrete!'

They reached the security desk in the building's foyer, where a seated guard eyed them suspiciously.

'Good morning, er, officer. We've come to—' Nightflyer began.

'—Check for dangerous radiation leaks!' Avatar interrupted.

The guard regarded them while they smiled back encouragingly.

The silence began to stretch to uncomfortable lengths.

'Can we go out and come back in again?' asked Avatar.

'Come back to the station, I've got a lead.' Scorpio's voice came from Nightflyer's communicator bracelet.

'Oh, thank chew,' muttered Nightflyer.

Back on the station, the whole team, plus Carla, gathered on the control deck. Scorpio had recapped his meeting at the DICE base, ending with the information Eastwood had shared with him.

'I'm suspicious,' said Black Swan. 'Why would these DICE people share information from their Anarchist informant with us?'

Electron turned to Carla. 'What do you know of DICE?'

'Nothing, really. They're a government agency, very secretive.'

'I'm inclined to trust Don and Eastwood,' said Scorpio. 'After all, they trusted me with—'

'That's exactly why we shouldn't trust them!' snapped Black Swan, somewhat irrationally.

'Please. It's my father.'

They all looked at Carla.

'I'm willing to chance it,' said Nightflyer.

'Me too!' said Avatar.

'It's our duty,' said Scorpio, ignoring the fact that their duties as police officers did not extend to this century.

Electron placed his hand reassuringly over Carla's. 'We'll get him back,' he said.

❖ San Francisco. Night.

Eastwood's informant had revealed that the Anarchists were moving Zod out of the city that very night, and that he would be transferred between vehicles in a small suburban park.

Several hours after sundown, the park stood empty. Other than the persistent noise of nightly traffic beyond the trees, all was quiet. Until one particular bush spoke.

'Can you see anything?'

'Shhh!' replied a nearby tree.

'Are you sure this illusion will hold?' asked a trash can.

'Unless that ghost girl shows up,' answered the bush. This killed the conversation for a while.

'I think you were imagining the ghost girl,' said the trash can eventually.

'Yes? Well I think I'm imaging you!'

'Shh, someone's coming,' hissed the tree.

An unmarked, inconspicuous van drove slowly along the single-lane road that bisected the park. Roughly in the centre of the ring of trees, it stopped and the back doors opened. Neutron unfolded his nine-foot frame from within and stepped clear.

That was the signal for Avatar to drop his illusion, and a bush, trash can, bench, and a couple of trees shimmered into the waiting forms of Strikeforce. The team moved towards the van, following their rehearsed plan. Avatar led, smashing into Neutron with an impact like a thunderclap, staggering the giant.

Even as they moved, Nightflyer's intuition was screaming at him. He began to say, 'I've got a bad feeling about this,' but never finished the sentence, as the van was suddenly torn to shreds from the inside and the hulking shape of Cosmos was revealed.

Avatar was right by the van, following his attack on Neutron, and was completely blindsided by Cosmos's punch. The force of the blow flung him clear across the park, his flight only stopped by an impact with a large tree.

'Zod's not in the van!' said Scorpio, unnecessarily as the evident trap unfolded before his eyes. Dragon leaped into view, knocking Nightflyer to the ground with a flying kick. Trusting Nightflyer to take care of himself, Scorpio drew his blaster and fired at Cosmos, with absolutely no effect. At the same time, he saw Black Swan blasting energy at Neutron, with an equal lack of effect.

Nightflyer and Dragon traded lightning-quick blows and blocks. Nightflyer had a clear edge in speed, but Dragon had enough skill to make up for it. They were at an impasse.

'Even if you can hit me, you can't get through my force field,' Dragon gloated as they circled one another.

'I know. I'm just making an opening for—' A blot of electricity hit Dragon, overloading his force field and dropping him to the ground. '—Him,' concluded Nightflyer.

Leaving Electron to deal with Dragon, Nightflyer spun to look for his next opponent. He saw Black Swan and Neutron in a whirling aerial ballet, trading energy bolts. Nothing he could do there. Scorpio was still blasting ineffectually at the advancing Cosmos. But something was still ...

Before he could grasp at what his intuition was telling him, Nightflyer saw the threat. Greywolf leaped into the park, propelled by the power of his suit's leg servos, and smashed into Scorpio. Scorpio went down hard, his blaster flying out of his reach.

Nightflyer's senses went into overdrive as he subconsciously calculated positions and distances. Scorpio was on his back, Greywolf pinning him and raising his clawed fists. Nightflyer had felt those claws, and was sure Scorpio's armour couldn't withstand them. Pinned and disarmed, with only one arm free and no leverage, Scorpio had no way to counter. If Nightflyer didn't move, Scorpio was dead.

Even as this flashed through Nightflyer's mind, he was moving. Three rapid strides gave him the momentum to leap at Greywolf. He saw his target, saw the claws descending, and knew with certainty that he would be fast enough.

Then, unbelievably, a split-second before Nightflyer struck, Scorpio found a way to counter. From the fingertips of his free arm, a burst of brilliant green energy struck Greywolf in the head, a physical impact that knocked the villain up and away from Scorpio's body.

Nightflyer saw it, but not in time to alter his aerial manoeuvre. His kick smashed into the villain, much harder than he had intended. There was an almighty crack, but whether of armour or bone Nightflyer couldn't tell, and Greywolf fell to the floor and lay motionless under Nightflyer's feet.

There was a momentary lull on the battlefield as everyone, hero and villain alike, turned to stare at where Greywolf lay with his head twisted at an unnatural angle, blood seeping through the cracked neck joint of his armour.

Dragon found his voice first.

'Neutron, get us out of here.'

Neutron flew over Dragon, grasping his outstretched arm as he passed, then flying low and fast away from the scene. Seeing this, Cosmos made a massive leap after them.

Black Swan was about to follow, when Scorpio's shout stopped her.

'Black Swan! Leave them. Avatar's down, and you can't take them all on by yourself.'

She saw the wisdom of this, and reluctantly descended to join her companions.

'That's twice they've got away from us.'

'Third time, we'll catch them,' promised Scorpio.

Electron was kneeling next to Greywolf. He had removed the man's helmet and was feeling for a pulse.

'He's dead,' he said.

'Good going, Scorpio,' said Nightflyer. Scorpio turned to him angrily.

'Me? You didn't have to kick—'

'I couldn't stop! I thought you were helpless!'

'Well I wasn't.' Scorpio turned away and spoke into his communicator. 'Computer, inform the authorities there was a casualty. Then teleport us up.'

'Confirmed.'

'Wait just a minute,' said Nightflyer, his voice now seething with anger. He grabbed Scorpio's arm.

'You don't just walk away from this!'

'It was ... regrettable,' said Scorpio.

'It was avoidable!' exploded Nightflyer.

Electron stepped between the men, sensing that they were seconds away from a fist fight.

'He's right. If he had known you could defend yourself ...'

'Chew, yes!' swore Nightflyer. 'Where did that blast come from?'

'Bioelectric force. I can generate—'

'And you didn't think this was worth telling us?' Nightflyer wasn't going to let it go.

The four Strikeforce members stared at each other with various degrees of anger and righteous indignation. Avatar limped over to join them. He had only just recovered consciousness from Cosmos's attack.

'What's happening?' he asked, aware that there was an argument but oblivious to the cause.

Electron ignored Avatar but spoke to the group in general.

'No more secrets between team members, ok?'

'Yeah,' said Nightflyer.

'Agreed,' said Scorpio.

Black Swan kept silent. There were some things she wanted to keep to herself.

As the teleport beam enveloped them, Avatar spoke up.

'You do all know I'm a demon?'

End of Part 2