

# Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

## Chapter Seven: The Defense League

- ❖ 23 November 1987.
- ❖ One month since Strikeforce arrived in the 20th century.
- ❖ Despite their heroic acts, an initial misunderstanding has resulted in them being perceived as terrorists by the authorities and general public.
- ❖ Their only ally is Major Harry Eastwood of the Department of Intelligence and Counter-Espionage.

Major Harry Eastwood reclined in his chair and swung his feet up onto his desk while he spoke to the face on the telecommunications monitor. He admired the man on the other end of the connection, but he didn't particularly like him. Thus, his words were abrupt.

'Yes Strikeforce are active on the west coast. But DICE will deal with it.'

'With respect, Major, your agents aren't equipped to deal with their level of power. That's more in our wheelhouse, and that's why I'm putting the Defense League at your disposal.'

Eastwood glared at the masked face on the monitor. He hated it when people started a sentence with 'with respect'.

'*With respect*, Defender, I think I have a better handle on the Strikeforce situation than you do.'

'And yet, Major, it has been three weeks since the government issued arrest warrants on them, and you've failed to bring them in. All I'm saying is we're here to help if you need us.'

Eastwood clenched his teeth so hard he bit clean through his un-lit cigar. The super-hero who the world knew as the Defender was speaking in a calm, friendly, tone, and his message was reasonable, but that just rubbed Eastwood up even more. Forcing himself to take a measured breath, he responded in what he hoped was the same calm voice.

'I appreciate that, Defender. As it happens, I do have some intelligence on suspected Strikeforce activity tonight. Stand by, and I'll be in touch. Eastwood out.'

Eastwood reached out and killed the connection. While he lit a new cigar his top agent, Don Newman, spoke up from where he had remained silent on the other side of the desk.

'You could have told him we've been in contact with—actually worked with—Strikeforce.'

'I could. But I broke so many regulations to do that, I want to share that knowledge with as few people as possible. As the Defender was so keen to point out, Strikeforce are still officially recognised as terrorists, regardless of what we think. And the government doesn't pay us to think.'

Don was silent for a moment, and then: 'Ok, fair point. But, why tell him we know what Strikeforce are doing tonight? We don't know any such thing.'

'Oh, I know exactly where they will be.' Eastwood flipped a switch on the desk's intercom. 'Operations? Stand by to transmit on the secure frequency Scorpio gave us. Message as follows ...'

- ❖ Strikeforce space station, geostationary orbit.

Scorpio materialised on the teleport pad. A glance told him that most of his team was already present on the control deck, along with Carla Zod.

‘No Black Swan?’ were his first words. The only answer was a shrug from Nightflyer. ‘Ok, Computer keep trying her communicator. Meanwhile, re-set the beam to the street coordinates I transmitted.’

‘Confirmed.’

‘Meanwhile,’ said Electron pointedly, ‘You can tell us what’s got you all excited.’

‘I had a call from Major Eastwood at DICE. He’s got a lead on where the Anarchists are keeping Professor Zod.’

‘Oh!’ gasped Carla. It had been almost a week, and despite Strikeforce’s promises they had been completely unable to locate her father.

Electron was more cautious. ‘Wait a minute. Eastwood’s lead didn’t pan out very well last time, did it?’

‘That was hardly Eastwood’s fault’ said Scorpio. ‘I mean, it’s not like he was deliberately trying to set us up, was it?’

❖ Defense League Headquarters, Manhattan.

The Defender banged a gavel to call the meeting to order and looked around the table at his team.

Supernova, his oldest and closest comrade-in-arms, sat at his left, radiating heat and light at a constant low level. The most powerful member of the League, it took constant effort for him to keep his solar radiation down to this tolerable level. The Defender knew that if Supernova was to cut loose, deliberately or inadvertently, he would vaporise the building and all of them with it.

Next to Supernova, Hermes sat fidgeting, waiting for action. The self-styled ‘world’s fastest man’ hated sitting down.

Black Pearl was the most relaxed of the group, and sat smiling while she waited for the mission briefing. A glowing point of black light—actually an ancient magical artefact from which she took her code name and her powers—hovered in the air close to her.

The final member of the group, Fate, didn’t sit at all. He hovered motionless, six inches off the ground, and as usual his mind seemed to be somewhere else entirely.

‘Strikeforce,’ began the Defender.

‘Are not a threat,’ Fate intoned. His half-black, half-white hood completely hid his face, and his voice was, as usual, expressionless. Despite their long association, the Defender still never knew quite where he stood with Fate.

‘So you say, Fate, but the government thinks otherwise. And while I’m willing to let them prove their innocence, their continued insistence on hiding themselves away—’

‘You hide your identity from the public, as do I.’

‘Yes, but that’s ...’ The Defender stopped himself before he got into yet another futile discussion of philosophy with Fate, and returned to the imminent problem. ‘Regardless of that, we agreed that our priority is to find Strikeforce and at least get their side of the story. And I have information on their possible whereabouts from Eastwood at DICE. It’s on the west coast, and it’s tonight, so we don’t have much prep time. Fate, will you transport us?’

Fate made a small gesture of acquiescence, and with that gesture teleported the entire team three thousand miles across the continent.

❖ Los Angeles.

With no perception of having travelled, the Defense League arrived inside a small, dimly-lit warehouse. The Defender noted, but did not remark on, the fact that Fate had come to the correct

location without being told where it was. Such was Fate's power to manipulate reality. It was an inconsistent and unpredictable power, but potentially limitless.

'I didn't necessarily mean right at this instant,' the Defender said.

'Nevertheless, Strikeforce are currently approaching this building. They will teleport into that open loading bay in a few seconds.' Another aspect of Fate's power: predicting future events. But as soon as Fate himself intervened in the events he saw, the prediction collapsed. So it was impossible for him to tell his team-mates the outcome of the confrontation with Strikeforce. But Fate was concerned. He knew, in a way he could not explain, that the Defender's current course of action was unwise.

'Ok, everybody into concealment,' said the Defender. 'Observe them first, only confront them on my signal.'

The Defense League was a well-practiced team, and fell to obey the Defender's orders without argument. Supernova, whose powers were ill-suited to hiding, flew from the building and in a few seconds was several blocks away. He would return when signalled. The others concealed themselves among the shadows of the warehouse interior.

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Strikeforce teleported down outside the warehouse. From this position, they could see the open loading-bay doors and into the darkened interior.

'No sign of life,' Scorpio stated the obvious.

'I have a bad feeling about this,' said Nightflyer.

'If Zod's inside, I would expect at least sentries,' said Electron.

'Not necessarily. They would want a low profile,' said Scorpio.

Avatar decided there was only one way to find out. He flew into the building at his top speed, intending to fly up and down every aisle of shelving until he found somebody, if necessary. Muttering under his breath about teamwork, Scorpio motioned the rest of Strikeforce to follow.

Inside the warehouse, Hermes was already agitated. He had stood still for almost half a minute, and it felt like an eternity. Consequently, when he saw a jet-black form flying past him at two-hundred kilometres per hour, he was more than ready for action. Springing from his hiding place, he kicked at the flying form.

The kick wasn't powerful by Avatar's standards, but took him completely by surprise and deflected his flight, causing him to crash into the tall shelving, completely destroying a section of it. Boxed electronic goods smashed down around him. Before he could extricate himself from the wreckage, Hermes was upon him and raining down punches, and the speed of the relentless attack kept Avatar off balance.

But at the sound of the collision—in fact, slightly before he was consciously aware of the sound of the collision—Nightflyer was sprinting into the warehouse. His top running speed was slightly slower than Avatar's flight, but he still reached Hermes in seconds. Hermes' fists were moving faster than the human eye could follow, but Nightflyer's reactions were up to the task. His own hand flashed out, grabbed a wrist, and used the momentum of the punch to flip the speedster onto his back. Hermes rolled to his feet instantly and punched at Nightflyer, who agilely bent out of the way while delivering a spinning kick to Hermes, who ducked in turn. Both men paused and each sized up the other. Nightflyer recognised that the other man was faster on his feet, but this wasn't a race, and Nightflyer was confident he had the edge in agility and reaction time.

Avatar, meanwhile, had stood and was poised to intervene, when a glowing form streaked into the warehouse like a blazing comet. Without slowing, Supernova collided with Avatar and drove him back through several more aisles of shelving. 'Oh no, not again,' was the last conscious thought to go through Avatar's mind.

Scorpio and Electron had entered the warehouse more slowly. They couldn't see who Nightflyer and Avatar were fighting, though the sound of massive property damage was troubling.

The Defender stepped out in front of them.

'Hold it—' he began, but Electron didn't let him finish. He sent a bolt of electricity towards the Defender. The Defender dodged easily, and in the next instant Electron found himself encased in bands of black energy that lifted him clear of the floor. The attack clearly didn't originate with the Defender, and looking around in confusion Electron saw Black Pearl hovering nearby. It was her namesake pearl that was projecting the energy at Electron. The energy was not harming him, but with his arms pinned to his sides he couldn't aim his electrical bolts at the woman.

On the ground, Scorpio had recognised the Defender from news footage, and knew he was supposedly a hero. But with his entire team embroiled in combat, Scorpio had no choice but to tackle the Defender.

He rapidly found himself completely outclassed. In the 24th century, Scorpio was considered to be in the top tier of unarmed combatants, but the Defender appeared to be more skilled, not to mention faster and stronger. Scorpio's only edge was his lightweight spider-silk armour, which blunted the impact of the Defender's punches. He was soon fighting completely defensively, however, unable to land a blow of his own on his opponent.

Electron was physically helpless, but lightning wasn't his only ability. Reaching out with his mind, he telekinetically grabbed the woman who held him and spun her rapidly in the air.

Black Pearl was taken by surprise as she suddenly found herself cartwheeling on the spot. Her concentration faltered—and with it, so did her mental control over the pearl. The bands of energy holding Electron evaporated. He fell several feet to the ground and landed badly, but he still had the presence of mind to keep up his disorienting attack on Black Pearl, while shouting to his team-mate.

'Scorpio, look! These aren't Anarchists. That's the Defender! This is...'

'This is the Defense League,' said Supernova, as he flew towards Electron. 'And if you surrender we can end this now.'

'Not until you tell us what you've done with Zod,' said Scorpio. He wasn't sure what the League's angle was here, but presuming Eastwood's information was correct ...

'Us?' asked the Defender. 'You're the ones who kidnapped him!'

There was a sudden pause in hostilities.

'There could be a misunderstanding here,' said Scorpio cautiously, remaining poised for an attack and not taking his eyes off the Defender. He began to wonder if Eastwood and DICE were as competent as he had assumed.

Nightflyer chose that moment to make an appearance, sprinting from the rear of the warehouse, having decisively pummelled Hermes unconscious.

'I told you I had a bad feeling about this,' he said.

'As did I,' said Fate, drifting almost casually into view. 'Strikeforce are not our enemies.'

The teams faced each other. Avatar and Hermes were missing, and with the appearance of Fate the odds slightly favoured the Defense League. Scorpio weighed up the tactical options and mentally reviewed what he knew of the opposing team. Nightflyer might be fast enough to beat the Defender, and Electron seemed capable of dealing with Black Pearl, but Scorpio was certain that with Avatar down none of them had any hope against the powerhouse that was Supernova. And Fate was a completely unknown quantity ...

It was Fate who solved the problem, however. Placing himself between the two teams, he spoke directly to the Defender.

'Strikeforce did not kidnap Professor Zod and his daughter, that was misinformation spread by the media. Carla Zod is currently safe and under their protection.'

'How do you know that?' demanded Electron in astonishment.

'Are you certain?' asked the Defender.

‘Nothing is certain,’ intoned Fate. ‘However, some things are highly probable.’

Electron grasped at the olive branch that Fate was apparently extending. With a flash of inspiration, he triggered his communicator.

‘Carla, are you there?’ he asked.

‘Of course,’ came Carla Zod’s instant reply from his communicator bracelet. ‘What’s happening?’

‘Ma’am, this is the Defender.’ The Defender raised his voice to carry through Electron’s communicator, though there was no need as its 24th-century microphone technology easily picked up all sound in the vicinity.

‘That’s ... nice.’ Carla sounded bemused.

‘Doctor Zod, are you safe and well, and voluntarily with Strikeforce?’

‘I am. They saved me from a terrorist attack and are currently looking for my father who was kidnapped in the same attack. What’s going on down there?’

The Defender made a mental note of ‘down there’—just where was Strikeforce’s headquarters, he wondered. What he said, however, was, ‘There appears to have been a ... misunderstanding. Strikeforce, you have our apologies.’

From the tone of his voice it was clear that the Defender hated to admit he was wrong.

‘I’m not sure that “sorry” cuts it,’ began Nightflyer. Scorpio interrupted him.

‘Drop it, Nightflyer. Nothing will be gained by fighting these people. Go and check that Avatar’s all right. Defender, as you can see, reports of our activities have been misstated.’

‘I ... do see. But seriously, Scorpio, your public relations are terrible. Why not be more open? I made an appeal weeks ago for you to straighten things out.’

‘We have a background that ... makes it difficult to be open about things. But you have my word that we are ... we are ...’ Scorpio cast around for the correct words, but Electron came to his rescue.

‘We’re superheroes,’ he said confidently. ‘Just as you are.’

‘And we saved the world,’ interjected Avatar, limping into view. ‘But we can’t tell you how or why,’ he added lamely.

‘Enough has been said,’ said Fate. And just like that, the Defense League vanished.

‘Ok ...’ said Electron.

‘Their teleport is better than ours,’ said Avatar peevishly.

‘Let’s face it, they’ve got us outclassed across the board,’ said Scorpio. ‘We need to make sure that doesn’t happen again.’

‘But we still won,’ asserted Nightflyer.

‘Did we?’

‘The moral victory,’ said Electron firmly.

And Scorpio didn’t have a retort for that.

**To be continued ...**