

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter 11: Swansong (Conclusion)

- ❖ 3 January 1988
- ❖ Strikeforce Space Station
- ❖ Members present: Avatar, Electron, Nightflyer, Scorpio, and me.

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- ❖ Strikeforce have discovered that their team-mate Black Swan is in the clutches of their arch-nemesis, the Warscout.
- ❖ They currently have no idea where to look.
- ❖ 'No idea' is normal for Strikeforce.

Strikeforce sat around the conference table on their space station's control deck and debated their next move. Pooling their knowledge, they found it depressingly scant. The Warscout had Black Swan and had been performing tests, or experiments, on her. From the Computer's analysis of the energy that had emanated from the Antarctic base, those tests involved boosting her power in some way. And the Warscout's parting words to Nightflyer suggested the aim was to complete the communication to his home dimension, precipitating the very crisis that they had been sent back in time to stop. It was clear that they now had another, very urgent, reason to rescue Black Swan.

'Or, if it comes to the worst, find some other way to deny her power to the Warscout,' said Avatar quietly.

'I won't countenance that,' said Scorpio adamantly.

Electron's mind went back to his conversation with Scorpio a few hours ago. There was a time when Scorpio would have been more pragmatic about completing his duty. His time in the 20th century had definitely changed him. For the better, in Electron's opinion.

'We don't even know where to look next,' he said.

'We know the common denominator in all this,' said Scorpio. 'Swan Research.' He looked pointedly at Electron. Some weeks ago Electron, in his civilian identity, had taken a job at Swan Research, specifically to give Strikeforce an inside knowledge of the corporation they believed could be a front for the Warscout.

Now, however, he merely shrugged. 'It's a huge multinational,' he said. 'Dozens of facilities, thousands of employees, contracts in every tech sector ... aerospace, defence ... where do we start looking?'

'We go to the top. Joseph Swan,' said Scorpio.

'But still, how do we get access to him? And we don't even ...'

'Computer, do you have an address for Joseph Swan?' asked Nightflyer.

'Confirmed. He has a residence in Washington D.C.'

'Ok. Let's visit.' As ever, Nightflyer was moving towards the teleport pad before he even finished the thought.

'Wait. Not the full team. You and me, civilian garb,' said Scorpio.

‘Right. But me and Nightflyer, not you,’ said Electron. ‘I’ve got a better chance of recognising something untoward.’

‘Very well then,’ said Scorpio reluctantly. ‘Computer, set the beam somewhere out of sight but close enough that Avatar and I can reach them quickly if they need support.’

‘Confirmed.’

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Just a few minutes later, Nightflyer and Electron—or, Steven Alexander and Franklin Marks in their civilian identities—stood outside locked gates on an exclusive avenue in the suburbs of Washington. Electron eyed the intercom system uncertainly.

‘So, what was the plan?’ he asked.

‘Plan? I’m making it up as I go along,’ said Nightflyer. He took a quick glance up and down the avenue, then grabbed Electron and made a standing jump cleanly over the three-metre gates.

‘So, if we’re just going to break in, why did we come in civilian clothes?’ asked Electron as they furtively dashed across a well-manicured lawn towards a large house.

‘That wasn’t my idea,’ pointed out Nightflyer. ‘But now that you mention it, let’s just knock!’

‘No, wait!’ but even as Electron protested, Nightflyer was making a beeline for the front door. Electron trotted after him.

‘This house is too big to search—’ said Nightflyer.

‘This is how people with money live in this century,’ said Electron.

‘—So we may as well just shake the tree and see what drops.’ And he pressed the obvious button next to the door. Somewhere inside the mansion, they heard a bell ring.

After a nervous delay, the door opened. The man who faced them was impeccably dressed in a butler’s uniform, and was quite clearly not Joseph Swan.

‘Yes?’ he asked, with a trace of a British accent.

‘Is Mr Swan in residence?’ asked Nightflyer.

‘I am afraid not. May I inquire as to your business?’

‘Uh ...’ Nightflyer floundered.

Electron reached out a hand and casually tapped on the butler’s forehead. There was a small spark of electricity, and the butler slumped forward, not falling, but suddenly motionless.

‘What—?’ asked Nightflyer, mystified.

‘He’s a robot.’

‘He’s the Warscout?’ When they had first encountered the Warscout, Electron’s dual abilities to sense both electricity and human thoughts had identified that he used a robot body.

‘I don’t think I could have deactivated the Warscout with such a small charge. But this is pretty good evidence that we’re in the right place—oh!’

‘What?’

‘I just detected a telepathic signal—from this robot! It’s communicating!’

‘A telepathic robot?’

‘I don’t understand it, but yes. So let’s assume the Warscout is now on his way and ...’

‘Move fast. Got it. Learn what you can from the robot, I’ll search the house.’

‘Look for a computer or modem, or anything with a signal, and use your communicator. The Computer will do the rest.’

‘Got it.’

While Nightflyer sped off into the house, Electron activated his own communicator. ‘Avatar, can you come down? I need someone to carry a robot.’

‘The Warscout?’ asked Avatar.

‘I don’t think I could have de—never mind, just come down.’

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Joined by Carla Zod^{*}, the four members of Strikeforce stood around a bench in the station's workshop. The robot butler lay on the bench with its head opened up to reveal a plastic matrix housing complex circuitry.

'It's sophisticated, but probably not more so than we have in the 24th,' Electron was saying.

'It's far ahead of our century,' Carla said. 'Maybe a few genius types like Green could have made this, but ...'

'You said it communicates telepathically?' asked Scorpio. 'And you thought it was safe to bring that to the station, opening us up to ... who knows what?'

Electron held up a tiny component. 'This is the communicator. Or rather, a digital-to-psi converter. I deactivated it before we brought the robot up. Relax, we're not going to be invaded by killer robots.'

'Digital-to-psi?' asked Nightflyer.

'I don't know why,' Electron shrugged. 'If the Warscout is a robot himself, I don't know why he converts communications to telepathic signals. So they can't be intercepted, maybe?'

'You're looking at it backwards,' said Carla. 'What if the Warscout isn't a robot, but an actual living consciousness that uses telepathy? And the converter—'

'—Would let him communicate with ... no, would let him actually occupy robot minds. Maybe? Is that possible? Electron looked at Carla.

'It's not ... impossible,' said Carla, hesitantly. 'Honestly, this is way beyond me. I could ... maybe study the robot, though?'

Electron smiled and nodded. He was a competent engineer and his 24th-century education gave him an edge when dealing with the primitive technology of the 20th, but he was the first to admit he was not a scientific genius. But he knew that Carla Zod was a genius by the standards of any century. He was confident that she would figure the puzzle out. And, more importantly, it would give her a project to distract her. He was concerned that, despite what she had previously said to him, being cooped up on the space station and brooding about her missing father wasn't good for her.

'Ok, interesting but this still doesn't give us a lead on Black Swan's location,' said Scorpio.

'That's where I come in again,' said Nightflyer, relieved that the tedious technobabble was over. 'I searched the house, it was empty. Not just empty, but sterile. No fresh food in the refrigerator, no dirty laundry, no books beside the bed. I think Joseph Swan, whoever he is, doesn't live there.'

'A show-home,' said Scorpio. 'Maintained to make him look like a regular human, and maybe give a place to meet people, but if he's a robot—'

'Or even a consciousness jumping between robots.'

'Yes, the point is he doesn't need a home.'

'Ok, so no clues in the house, but I found a computer terminal and our Computer downloaded everything on it.'

'Correction: not everything. My intrusion was detected and countermeasures deployed before I could complete the download,' the Computer interjected.

'But you got something useful?' asked Scorpio.

'Confirmed. Files encrypted in a machine-readable format.'

'And you can read them?'

'I am a machine. And they were in machine-readable format. As I said.'

There was a hint of huffiness in the Computer's monotone, and Electron winced slightly. The Computer shouldn't be demonstrating any kind of emotion, but ever since they had been stranded here in

^{*} Who has been resident on the station since Strikeforce rescued her from Anarchists. Carla is my friend. She understands me.

the 20th century, it hadn't been behaving quite ... the way a 24th-century artificial intelligence should behave. Electron wished the team had a computer scientist capable of maintaining an AI.

'Thank you, Computer,' was what he said. 'And what did you learn from them?'

'Many things. Do you wish me to summarise my conclusions?'

'Oh God, yes please. Summarise,' said Nightflyer.

'Summary: the Warscout teleported Black Swan to a facility in the state of Oregon, where he will continue experimenting on her.'

'Do you have teleport coordinates for the facility?' asked Nightflyer.

'Is the Pope a bear?' asked the Computer. There was an awkward silence. 'No?' guessed Avatar eventually.

'Yes.'

'Well, set the beam,' said Nightflyer.

'Information: escalating gravitational anomalies at those coordinates make the beam lock unreliable.'

'Ok, prep the shuttle, we'll fly down,' said Nightflyer.

Carla was studying graphs the Computer was displaying on a monitor screen. 'This doesn't look good. Those energy readings ... we're looking at a potential singularity formation.'

'Oh no!' said Avatar. 'Er ... what's one of those?'

'In layman's terms ... a black hole. One that could destroy the Earth.'

'Black Swan's power isn't that great,' Scorpio objected.

'But it sounds like the Warscout has been amplifying it.' Carla looked at the graphs again. 'But no, I'm wrong, the energy density is too low. It would need a final power injection of ... I don't know ... terajoules.'

'Nothing short of an atomic bomb has that much power in this century,' said Electron.

'Information: the Swan Research Oregon facility is classified as a nuclear research facility.'

'Oh ...' said Electron, lost for words.

'How long have we got?' asked Scorpio, addressing the question to Carla.

Carla shrugged helplessly. 'This is all speculation ... if this power curve continues ... then the bomb explodes in ... six minutes, maybe?'

'No time for the shuttle. Computer, do you have enough of a beam lock for a teleport?'

'Confirmed. Beam lock has 60 percent stability.'

'And 40 percent...?'

'40 percent horrible death to anyone using the beam,' said the Computer matter-of-factly.

Scorpio moved to the teleport platform. 'I'm going. Anybody else?'

Before he finished the question, Avatar, Electron and Nightflyer were standing next to him.

'Ok. We go in fast, one objective: find Black Swan and get her away from anything that looks like a nuclear bomb. Computer, put us down.'

'Good luck,' Carla said as they vanished.

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Strikeforce found themselves inside an open compound surrounded by multiple layers of high fences. Ten metres from the teleport point stood a solid-looking concrete bunker. A massive steel door faced them.

'Avatar?' said Scorpio. The demon stopped feeling for scrambled or missing body parts, and flew to the door. Digging his fingers into the steel, he tore the door open.

Scorpio was giving orders as they moved to follow Avatar.

'We don't have the power to fight the Warscout if he's here in person, so we—'

'Damn it, Scorpio, we know how to fight,' snapped Nightflyer.

The interior of the bunker was lit by blinding white light. In the centre of the open space, Black Swan's spread-eagled form was clamped to a framework of steel tubes and wires. The framework was suspended over an ominous large metal ovoid, almost a metre wide, wired to banks of monitoring equipment.

A number of humanoid robots moved around the device, performing unfathomable tasks. Strikeforce had no way of knowing if any of them—or even all of them—was the Warscout, but the robots all stopped their tasks and turned to face the intruders, raising arms that revealed energy weapon apertures.

'Is that the bomb?' asked Avatar.

'I think so,' said Electron.

Avatar flew directly towards the robots. He scattered three of them with his charge, but paid no more attention to them. He placed his arms around the bomb and lifted, tearing it loose from its cradle.

'Is it safe to move it?' he asked, belatedly.

'Just go,' said Electron faintly, then joined Scorpio in trading energy bolts with the robots.

Nightflyer cartwheeled through the crossfire of energy, leaping up onto the structure that held Black Swan in place. Her eyes were open but unfocussed. He checked the clamps which held her limbs, finding them to be solid metal and beyond his ability to break.

'Need to blast these clamps,' he said. Scorpio responded immediately, hurling his blaster towards his team-mate. Without even turning, Nightflyer reached up and plucked it out of the air. Four efficient shots dealt with the clamps, and he slung Black Swan's limp form over his shoulder.

Electron and Scorpio were at the door as he joined them. 'How far do you think Avatar can fly that bomb in six minutes?' he asked.

'Not far enough,' said Electron. 'Let's get Black Swan on the station.'

They sprinted to the teleport point and Scorpio requested a beam up. A split-second later, they were on the station.

Avatar was already on the station.

So was the bomb.

'Avatar!' screamed Electron.

'I had to get it away from her ... why have you brought her here?' shrieked the demon.

'Oh, chew. We've—'

Before Electron could finish the thought, Carla Zod stood up from where she had been crouching behind the bomb. She held a small circuit board.

'Disarmed,' she said calmly. 'What?' She said in mock innocence. 'You thought I wouldn't know how to disarm a nuclear warhead?'

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Black Swan lay on a bed in the station's medical bay. None of the team knew anything more than basic first aid, but the Computer had scanned her vital signs and pronounced her 'nominal'. She was awake and her eyes focussed on Scorpio.

'We were lucky,' Scorpio was explaining. 'The Warscout wasn't there in person, probably because he was just about to explode a nuclear bomb. But, anyway, what's important is ... how are you?'

'It's gone. My power. I can't feel it any more. Whatever he did ... he took my powers.' She sounded small and lost, nothing like the assertive, confident woman they were used to.

'I think it was an overload,' said Carla. 'He pumped you full of external energy, trying to amplify your power and it was like ... like...'

'Like a fuse blowing,' said Electron.

'I'm sorry,' said Scorpio, 'We should have been faster. We should have ... should have done a lot of things differently. Checked up on you sooner. Been closer friends ...' he tailed off.

Black Swan swung her legs off the bed and tried to stand. She angrily batted Scorpio's hand away as he reached out to steady her.

'Yeah. Well, we're not. And now we're not even team-mates.'

'Oh, come on—'

'No, you "come on". I'm not Black Swan any more. You don't need a Strikeforce member without powers.'

'You've got a lot more to offer—'

'No. You don't even need me as a scientist. You've got her.'

'That's not really fair,' said Electron quietly. Carla remained silent.

'I need to get out. Get away. Think. Just ... just give me some time to work this out.'

Black Swan walked out of the med bay. Nobody followed her.

End of *Swansong*.