

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter 14: Crossfire Part II

- ❖ Krai Battlecruiser *Kabal*
- ❖ Earth orbit
- ❖ 16 January 1988

On the bridge of the *Kabal*, Captain Korrett could barely believe her eyes. In seconds, the outnumbered primitives had taken out the entire squad of her warrior drones. She began to see why this planet was interdicted. The inhabitants had powers far beyond those of an individual Krai, almost on a par with the accursed Star Guard themselves.

‘Three more drone squads to report to the transporter room,’ she ordered. She would throw away as many lives as necessary to complete her mission.

‘Captain, another vessel has entered planetary orbit,’ her sensor technician announced.

‘Give details.’

‘Yes, captain. Their stealth cloaking makes it difficult to lock on to ... it is a small Boluscan cruiser, captain! They appear to be communicating with the planet.’

Korrett leaned forward in her chair. ‘Intercept their communication. Relay it to bridge speakers.’

The voice of a Boluscan, translated into English, filled the bridge. Korrett knew the voice.

‘It is the Star Guard, captain,’ said the eager tech. ‘Shall I jam the signal?’

‘Do not presume to anticipate my wishes. Allow them to communicate. Order the drone squads to stand down.’

Korrett settled back into her chair and bared her teeth in pleasure. She knew a secret about that Star Guard ship that would serve her well.

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- ❖ West Coast Headquarters of the Department of Intelligence and Counter-Espionage
- ❖ Los Angeles

In the main medical lab of the underground DICE base, an alien stood among the debris of Strikeforce’s fight with the Krai. In contrast to the wolf-like Krai, this one was more-or-less human in appearance, hairless and ebony skinned, tall and impressively muscled.

‘I am Singularity, leader of the Star Guard, representing the Emissariate of Bolusca. I demand that you turn over the Princess M’Krell.’

The voice spoke English but out of sync with the alien’s lips: a real-time translation of the alien language, as the Krai captain’s speech had been. Along with the English was a second language which none of the humans present understood. Strikeforce, barely breathing hard after their brief fight with the Krai, prepared to launch themselves into battle again. All except for Nightflyer, whose eye was on their other alien guest: the Princess M’Krell, who appeared to be reacting to the second language. In stark

contrast to her fearful reaction to the Krai, she seemed relieved. At least, that's how Nightflyer interpreted the look on her delicate, not-quite-human features.

The alien who called himself Singularity made no threatening moves. Instead, he dropped to one knee, faced the princess, and spoke again with the strange double-translation.

'Highness, I am pleased to find you safe and offer my condolences for the loss of your crew. With your permission we shall transport you from this primitive world.'

'Primitive?' growled Major Eastwood.

'He does have a point, though,' said Electron.

The princess stepped towards Singularity. Strikeforce and the DICE agents, now sure there would be no more fighting, watched the scene play out. M'Krell faced Singularity—even with him kneeling, her head was barely higher than his—and placed one hand on an insubstantial, holographic shoulder. When she spoke, whatever device Singularity was using to translate helpfully also rendered her speech into English.

'I thank you for your arrival, Singularity. But please do not call these people "primitive". They have just saved me from a squad of Krai drones.'

'My apologies, Highness. And to you, people of Earth. But time presses, Highness. There is a Krai battlecruiser in orbit, with firepower far greater than my small ship. I dare not drop my stealth cloak and teleport you into my ship. I fear I must land to allow you to board.'

'That is acceptable,' said the princess.

'I'll have no more aliens landing in the city!' snapped Eastwood. He had been standing in the background, his hand never straying from his holstered sidearm, following the conversation intently. 'Not if you're going to bring those wolf soldiers with you!'

'This Earth man is correct, Highness. The Krai already have a lock on this location, in fact may be preparing to send down more soldiers as we speak. You should evacuate this place quickly.' Singularity turned his head and his lips moved silently for a few seconds, talking to his crew out of range of the holographic transmission. He turned back and addressed Eastwood. 'There is a circle of standing stones near your city. Do you know it?'

'There's a Mesoamerican site in the hills,' said Luey, 'Twenty—'

'Do not identify it further! This transmission may be monitored.'

'Gotcha.'

'Yeah, we can find it,' said Eastwood.

'We will rendezvous there in thirty of your minutes. By your leave, Highness.' The holographic image of Singularity blinked off.

'Well, Major?' Scorpio asked.

'Damned if I know what to do,' said Eastwood. 'I've got no authority to negotiate with aliens.'

'She wants to go with them,' said Nightflyer.

'And if it stops the planet being invaded ...' said Scorpio, letting the thought tail off meaningfully. 'The last thing we want is an interstellar diplomatic incident.'

'All right, all right. Damn it. Let's go to their rendezvous.'

'With respect, Major—' Scorpio began.

'Every time you say "with respect" you're about to say something I don't like. Fine, ok, you take her. Get her to the damned rendezvous, and if the planet gets invaded I'm holding you responsible.'

'Major, if the planet gets invaded I'll hold myself responsible too.'

'Ah, just get out of here!'

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- ❖ Mesoamerican stone circle, east of Los Angeles
- ❖ Thirty minutes later.

Strikeforce had left the city in a borrowed DICE vehicle, not wanting to risk their teleport when there were hostile space ships in orbit. They had left the truck in a small parking area—thankfully deserted, despite it being a fine, sunny Saturday morning—and walked up the short trail to the stone circle.

None of them had been to the site before, and they were all slightly awed by it. Sixteen rough-hewn obelisks, ranging from three to four metres tall, stood in a ring some thirty metres across. Its purpose was unclear, but it must have taken primitive men considerable effort to move and raise the massive stones. Electron noted the short shadows cast by the mid-morning sun and thought about other stone circles he had read about, where ancient men had predicted solar events. Black Swan would have loved this, he thought, still feeling a pang of guilt when he thought of their missing team mate.

Avatar touched one of the stones. ‘How old is Mesoamerican?’ he asked.

‘Um, about a thousand years,’ said Electron, not actually very sure.

‘Hmm. No. Much older. There is magic here.’

‘That’s all we need,’ muttered Scorpio.

Princess M’Krell, standing close to Nightflyer, looked around apprehensively. Though she felt these Earthmen were friends—and, after all, they had fought the Krai on her behalf—she still felt alone and vulnerable on this alien world.

‘Steve,’ she said.

‘Yes?’ responded Nightflyer, surprised. But she didn’t have the English vocabulary to phrase her thoughts, so she simply moved closer to him.

A whistle of air caused them all to look up. A small, sleek vessel, a cylinder with engine bulges to either side, was rapidly dropping towards them.

M’Krell said some alien words, then clearly added, ‘Star ... Guard.’ Strikeforce relaxed slightly.

With startling speed, but no visible form of propulsion, the small ship dropped vertically, slowing only at the very last moment, and settling noiselessly onto the grass at the far side of the circle. A hatch opened and five individuals exited. Ten metres from Strikeforce they stopped, and Singularity spoke.

‘Highness, people of Earth, may I introduce the Star Guard. Satellite, Starburst, Starquake, and Corona.’

Satellite, a humanoid, wore a sleek, metallic suit, sealed against the environment, but close-fitting enough for Strikeforce to assume it was a female. An opaque faceplate let them see nothing of her features, however.

Starburst was most definitely not human, appearing to be nothing more than a burning orange ball of gas roughly half a metre across. Nevertheless, from the way the ball pulsed when Singularity said its name, Strikeforce had to conclude it was a sentient lifeform of some kind.

Starquake was closer to a humanoid shape, but short and squat, barely a metre and a half tall and just about as wide. When he walked, his booted feet left deep imprints in the ground.

Corona’s form was entirely that of a human woman, but her facial features were obscured by a halo of light, and streamers of energy flickered from her as she walked.

Scorpio politely introduced Strikeforce by name, and then stopped, momentarily lost for words. He had the feeling that an occasion as momentous as this called for a speech, but he was unaccustomed to public speaking.

The princess saved him any embarrassment by stepping forward and speaking.

‘Star Guard, greetings and my thanks on behalf of the Kingdom of High Ilona for your timely arrival. Let us depart this world before we visit more danger upon—’

‘He’s going for a weapon!’ screamed Corona suddenly. Rising into the air, she let loose a flare of energy that burst amongst Strikeforce, dazzling them.

‘Wait—’ began Singularity, but Starquake, a rookie barely out of the Star Guard academy and eager to prove himself, was already moving. From a standing start, he leaped, covered the ten metres between the Star Guard and Strikeforce, and landed with a tremendous impact. The ‘quake’ part of his name was shown to be appropriate, as the ground around him shook and bucked, throwing all of Strikeforce, and incidentally the princess, from their feet.

‘What the chew?’ asked Nightflyer, rolling to his feet and spitting dirt and grass from his mouth. He gained his feet in time to see Avatar land a powerful punch on Starquake’s chest. It was the kind of punch that usually sent his opponents flying through the air, but the short, squat alien barely rocked back on his heels.

‘Uh-oh,’ said Avatar.

Nightflyer began moving to help, but before he could do anything, Starburst was on him. The alien had divided into half-a-dozen smaller glowing balls, and they zipped around him, doing very little harm but throwing him off balance.

‘I think this counts as an interstellar diplomatic incident,’ Electron shouted to Scorpio while throwing an electric bolt at Satellite. ‘Did you go for a weapon?’ Scorpio held up his hands to show that his blaster was still holstered, then had to dive clear of another energy blast from Corona.

‘I think that’s a bit of a moot point at the moment,’ Scorpio said. ‘Let’s end this quickly and make sure we’re still alive to complete the negotiations.’ He rolled to his feet and did draw his blaster then, directing a shot at the flying Corona. It had depressingly little effect on the alien woman, who seemed to have a comprehensive set of energy-based powers. ‘I need something physical I can throw,’ he muttered, wishing he had completed the shield he and Electron had been fabricating on the space station.

Meanwhile, Satellite seemed insulated against Electron’s bolts but her own armament also consisted of electrical projectors, and they similarly had no effect on Electron.

Avatar had by now overcome the surprisingly tough Starquake, demonic strength proving more than the super-dense alien could withstand. He saw that Corona was wreaking havoc on the ground, flying safely beyond the reach of any other member of the Strikeforce, and flew into the sky to engage her. As he flashed upwards, he saw another, more ominous shape looming far above and growing in apparent size with alarming rapidity.

‘Spaceship!’ was all he had time to shout before the sonic boom of the decelerating Krai battlecruiser deafened everybody.

Singularity was the only member of the Star Guard not engaged in the battle, and had also seen the Krai ship descending from orbit. He wasn’t sure what had gone wrong on the ground, whether Strikeforce had really double-crossed them or whether it was a simple mistake, but he had to make this battle stop. Using his personal teleport power, he blinked out and reappeared forty metres up, directly behind Corona. He grabbed her arms and pinned them behind her back, forcing her head up.

‘Corona, stop! Strikeforce are not our enemies. Look up!’

The Krai ship was several kilometres above the ground, and still it looked massive.

To Singularity’s surprise, Corona simply laughed. Then she effortlessly shrugged out of his grip and hurled him down towards the Earth. In the second he spent tumbling through the air, he wondered when she had gained such physical strength. Then he smashed into the ground with an impact that sent earth and rock flying, and tested the limits of his near-invulnerability.

‘No, Singularity. For some time now, the Krai have been my paymasters.’

Stunned by her words as much as by his impact with the ground, Singularity blinked up at his friend, as she hurled a flare of solar energy at him. But before the outpouring energy struck him, a flying figure interposed itself. The flare struck Avatar fully, with an intensity the demon had scarcely ever felt before. But his force field was active, and it took the impact, shorting out in the process but protecting him from

total annihilation. Continuing his upward flight, he struck Corona with the full force of his strength and momentum.

On the ground, Strikeforce and Star Guard alike had stopped their conflict to witness the interplay between Singularity and Corona.

'Electron, I apologise,' said Satellite to the man she had been blasting a few seconds earlier. 'We appear to have a traitor on our team.'

Corona's energy reserves were depleted by the massive blast she had unleashed in an effort to destroy Singularity, and Avatar's punch rocked her back. But she was still one of the most powerful beings in this part of the galaxy, and she soon recovered and counter-attacked, her own punch striking Avatar with a sound like a thunderclap. Then simultaneous electric discharges from Electron and Satellite hit her and she completely lost control of her flight, tumbling head over heels through the air.

Before Strikeforce or the Star Guard could press the advantage, however, multiple teleport beams operated from the Krai ship, and multiple squads of warrior drones appeared on the battlefield. And chaos ensued.

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On the bridge of the *Kabal*, Korrett followed the action via a holographic display. The battlecruiser's weaponry could pulverise the field of combat from the air, but there were good reasons to avoid this. First, because the devastation could make it difficult to confirm that the High Ilonan princess had been killed. Second, because Corona was a valuable strategic asset that should be spared if at all possible, and the *Kabal's* disruptor fire would be indiscriminate.

Third, and most important, because it would deny Korrett the pleasure of seeing the accursed Star Guard and their new human allies torn limb from limb by her warriors.

Krai warrior drones were being dispatched to the surface as fast as the transporter rooms could cycle. Each heavily-armed drone was a match for any other soldier in the galaxy. But the Star Guard each possessed powers far beyond any normal soldier, and the Earth men seemed no less powerful. As fast as Korrett sent in drones, the Star Guard and Strikeforce were defeating them. Korrett began to doubt that victory was achievable, and ordered her weapon crews to stand by. If she had to annihilate the battlefield—along with large numbers of her own drones—then so be it.

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On the ground, Scorpio was equally worried. Fast as Strikeforce and the Star Guard dealt with Krai warriors, more appeared to reinforce their ranks. He was also acutely aware that every member of his team was vulnerable to the Krai blaster fire, and one well-aimed shot could finish any of them. Only the Krai numbers were working to Strikeforce's advantage, as they were able to engage groups of the Krai in hand-to-hand combat and use the press of their enemies' bodies to shield themselves from fire.

Scorpio was currently standing over and protecting the unconscious form of Electron, who, without any particular unarmed combat ability, had fallen early in the battle. To make matters worse, Strikeforce's heaviest hitter—Avatar—and the armoured Satellite were otherwise engaged, fighting an aerial battle with the immensely powerful Corona.

'How many of these things do you think are on the ship?' he called to Nightflyer.

'Too many. It's *huge!*'

'We're going to need a better plan,' said Scorpio.

'You mean better than no plan at all? Hold the fort, I'll confer with the aliens.'

Nightflyer leaped clean over one squad of Krai, weaved through the blaster fire of another, and skidded to a halt near where the solid-looking Star Guard leader was defending Princess M'Krell from attack. He was surprised to note that the princess had seized a fallen Krai blaster and was enthusiastically joining the battle.

‘Singularity, this isn’t winnable,’ he said. ‘We’re looking for a better plan.’

‘Better than no plan at all?’ said M’Krell, Singularity’s translator making a good job of conveying her sarcasm.

Nightflyer grinned as he dropped a pair of Krai with spinning kicks. ‘We’re usually good with no plans,’ he explained.

‘I have a plan, but I shall need your help,’ said Singularity. He shouted across the battlefield. ‘Starburst! Defend the princess!’

With a chorused ‘Weeeeeeeeee’ of glee, the multiple glowing balls of sentient plasma barrelled across the field, scattering Krai as they went, and formed a swooping cloud around the princess. ‘Defending, boss!’

Nightflyer pushed aside the questions of how such a lifeform was even possible, let alone how it was speaking, and turned to Singularity. ‘So what’s the—’

Singularity grabbed him and they both vanished from the battlefield.

‘Well, that’s just typical,’ muttered Scorpio, punching a Krai as punctuation.

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Nightflyer and Singularity appeared in a cramped metal corridor that smelled, to Nightflyer’s nose, of dogs. On arrival, Singularity immediately collapsed to the floor.

‘Strain of teleporting so far too great,’ he gasped.

‘Why do you teleporters always do that?’ said Nightflyer, irritated. Singularity shook his head. He tore the golden starburst emblem from his uniform breast and pushed it into Nightflyer’s hand.

‘That is why I brought you. Find the bridge. Disable the captain. Here. Translator.’

Before Singularity had finished speaking, Nightflyer was moving. At the best possible speed compatible with remaining stealthy, he set off down the corridor. He didn’t waste time trying to understand the layout of the massive vessel, instead trusting his intuition to carry him in the right direction.

At an intersection, he pulled up just in time as a squad of armed Krai marched past. As the last two passed, he leaped at them and knocked both out. He scooped up their blasters as the rest of the squad turned, one barked orders—literally—and they opened fire. Despite his speed, he had little space to dodge in the corridor and several energy bolts caught him, causing painful burns but nothing his rapid-healing ability couldn’t cope with. The important thing was that he now had weapons that might do some damage to this vessel. He dived back into the side corridor to avoid the next volley, rolled to his feet, and accelerated to his top speed, abandoning stealth as alarm klaxons began to sound throughout the ship.

With a blaster in each hand, Nightflyer sprinted into a large, circular room. Consoles ringed the room, and a raised chair occupied the centre, in which sat the Krai he recognised as Captain Korrett, studying the battle on a holographic display. She looked up as Nightflyer came into view.

Not waiting to allow her to give an order, Nightflyer squeezed the triggers on both blasters. Playing the muzzles around the room, he fired indiscriminately into consoles and display screens, being careful not to hit any of the Krai themselves. Smoke and sparks erupted wherever the energy hit.

‘Nobody move,’ he said, once he was sure he had made his point. The device Singularity had given him, now pinned to the breast of his own jumpsuit, translated his words into the growls of the Krai language.

No Krai moved. The drones at the consoles appeared frozen, not with fear but in anticipation of a word from their captain. Captain Korrett merely bared her teeth in what Nightflyer thought must be a smile. The captain was in her own domain and supremely confident. Nightflyer suddenly wondered what he was doing. As usual, he had moved without any particular plan.

‘Go for your gun,’ he said, confidently. ‘I’m faster than you.’

The Captain made sure her hand was nowhere near her sidearm. Being gunned down by a primitive was not, in her opinion, a warrior's death. It never occurred to her that Nightflyer had not shot a single one of her crew, and would not shoot her. The idea of not shooting an enemy was completely foreign to her nature.

'Surrender, Earth man,' she snarled. 'I have a hundred drones on their way this bridge.'

'*You'd* better surrender before they get here and I have to start shooting again.'

Nightflyer wasn't sure what he would do if she called his bluff. But at that moment, Singularity appeared next to him, looking shaky on his feet but standing resolute and facing the captain.

The Star Guard leader pointed at a console which was a mass of twisted metal after Nightflyer's attack. 'That is your main fire control station, captain.' He pointed at another. 'That is your transporter room communication.' As an aside to Nightflyer, he said 'Good shooting.' Nightflyer shrugged modestly.

'Captain, incoming ships on long-range scanners,' the Krai sensor tech interrupted urgently.

'And *that* is the rest of the Star Guard we summoned as reinforcement,' finished Singularity.

Korrett growled in frustration. 'We shall fight to the death, Boluscan,'

'As shall we, Krai' said Singularity resolutely.

'Whoa, whoa, enough of this death business,' said Nightflyer hastily. 'Why don't we call it a draw and all retreat gracefully?'

Singularity and Korrett, implacable hereditary foes, glared at one another, and Nightflyer was afraid things would escalate again. To his surprise, Korrett broke first.

'So be it. This is a neutral system, and we Krai will honour the neutrality treaty. This has obviously been a ... misunderstanding. Helm, prepare to leave orbit.'

'And take your soldiers with you,' said Nightflyer, suddenly worried about what the US government would do with several dozen ferocious aliens. That was the kind of thing that could come back and bite you.

'Contact the transporter room, retrieve the drone squads.'

'The communication console is—'

'Then *run*,' she growled at the hapless technician, who scampered off the bridge.

'We will stay here until you are safely clear of orbit,' said Singularity.

'We will?' asked Nightflyer in alarm.

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In fact, the Krai withdrawal went smoothly. The *Kabal*, along with all of the Krai drones and the turncoat Corona, had left the solar system, presumably to return to its own empire and report a failed mission.

Now Strikeforce were facing the Star Guard cruiser at the stone circle, while the princess made a flowery speech of thanks. The Strikeforce members fidgeted awkwardly, unused to this type of occasion.

When the speech was finished, Satellite stepped forward holding a small case. She opened the case, and Singularity took four small, golden starburst medallions from it. He presented one to each member of Strikeforce.

'This is our highest mark of respect, and will identify you anywhere in known space as allies of the Star Guard and friends of the Emissariate of Bolusca. Furthermore, you may find the translation utility useful should you visit any other planet.'

Scorpio said a few words of thanks and the Star Guard, with M'Krell, boarded their cruiser. Nightflyer caught a last backwards glance from the princess as the hatch closed. He thought she looked vaguely sad.

'Not much chance of us visiting another planet,' said Electron.

'Oh, I don't know,' said Nightflyer as he carefully fastened the emblem to his jumpsuit. 'I'm pretty sure I'll get round to it one day.'