

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter 15: The Hill

- ❖ Strikeforce Space Station
- ❖ Geostationary Earth Orbit
- ❖ Wednesday 20 January 1988

It was midnight, Los Angeles time. Electron and Scorpio were conversing quietly on their space station's control deck. They sat at the central conference table, both with their masks off while they relaxed. Scorpio had a steaming mug of chocolate in front of him, while Electron had a glass of scotch. Electron was toying with the golden starburst emblem the Star Guard had presented him with. He wondered if he should wear it on his uniform, and was thinking that he probably shouldn't. Then he wondered if he should have the computer reverse-engineer the translation software, and was deciding that he definitely shouldn't, when Scorpio broke into his thoughts.

'I'm uncomfortable with drinking on the space station.'

'Come on, James, one scotch isn't going to affect my performance if we're called to an emergency. Besides, I know you go for a beer with your police buddies after your shifts.'

'My blood chemistry has been altered to eliminate all metabolic poisons. I couldn't get inebriated if I tried.'

'Huh,' was all Electron said to that. He wondered what other powers Scorpio hadn't yet revealed to the team despite them all agreeing to be more open.

'But I'm not worried about you. It's ...' Scorpio dropped his voice. 'Carla.'

Electron fidgeted uncomfortably. Carla Zod, currently sleeping in the room they had assigned her in the living quarters one deck down, had been a virtual prisoner on the space station for over two months. She had free use of the teleport if she wanted to visit Earth, but she still spent more time confined to the station's spartan environment than Electron thought was healthy. He also knew she was drinking more than he was comfortable with.

He frowned, and by an effort of will rearranged the molecules of alcohol in the glass into simple hydrogen and carbon dioxide. He watched as the expensive whisky bubbled away.

'It's tough for her,' he said eventually.

'I know. The sooner we find her father and she can return to some form of normal life, the better.'

'We don't know he's alive,' said Electron, trying to be realistic.

'Even so, finding that out will give her some form of closure.'

'I guess.'

'Information. Incoming teleport,' announced the Computer. A second later, Nightflyer and Avatar appeared on the teleport platform.

'I've got a plan,' said Avatar.

'Is this going to be like your plan to organise a team baseball game?' asked Scorpio dubiously.

'Bored with baseball now. This plan is for finding the Anarchist base.'

Scorpio and Electron sat up and paid attention. Nightflyer sat down next to them and put his feet up on the table. 'It's actually a good plan,' he said.

'DICE have two Anarchist prisoners,' began Avatar.

'Neutron and the Dragon,' confirmed Scorpio. 'But they won't talk, Eastwood has tried. And Electron's telepathy isn't precise enough to pluck thoughts from their heads.'

'I just get impressions, emotions and feelings,' said Electron apologetically.

'Yes, that's not important. The important thing is that DICE have two prisoners. So we get DICE to move them and make sure the information leaks. The Anarchists will attack the prisoner transfer to rescue their friends. And we follow them back to their base.'

'How do we know they'll try to rescue them?' asked Electron.

'I'd come to rescue any of you,' said Avatar patiently.

'But that's because of who you are. They're the bad guys. Being selfish is kind of part of that.'

'So we also leak that they've agreed to talk in exchange for immunity. Make it vital that the other Anarchists liberate them one way or another,' said Nightflyer, amending the plan on the fly.

'Don't you think DICE have tried something as simple as following them before?' said Electron.

'But DICE don't have an insubstantial, invisible, super-fast demon,' said Nightflyer.

'That's me,' said Avatar, smugly. 'In astral form.'

'Eastwood will never go for it,' said Scorpio.

'We won't know until we ask him,' Nightflyer pointed out.

'Very well, let's ask him,' said Scorpio, standing and putting on his helmet.

'Now? It's after midnight.'

'He's the head of an international spy organisation. You think he *sleeps*?'

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❖ Coastal Highway, California
❖ Thursday 28 January 1988

Eastwood had been convinced surprisingly easily. The truth was, he had been looking for a way to score a decisive blow against the Anarchists for months. The only sticking point had been his refusal to risk losing the Dragon and Neutron if Avatar's plan went wrong. As a compromise, the plan was modified to use members of Strikeforce to pose as the Anarchist prisoners, using Avatar's magical illusions.

So it was that an unmarked armoured prisoner transport vehicle was speeding north on the Coastal Highway, supposedly carrying the Dragon and Neutron. Scorpio, wearing a DICE agent's uniform over his own spider-silk armour, rode in the front. He had left his helmet on the space station, as it would have been a clear give-away as to his identity. Besides, he had been having second thoughts about continuing to wear the helmet. With Electron's help, he had fashioned a cowl of the same ultra-light, bulletproof material as his armour, which he could pull up over his head to conceal his upper face. Not only was it more convenient in this instance, he thought he might adopt it permanently. It felt less threatening than the militaristic full-face helmet, and recently he had been thinking about how he could present a better public image.

Beside him, Don Newman was driving the truck. Eastwood had insisted that his top agent be involved, and that was fine by Scorpio. He had come to trust and respect Don over the last few weeks, and felt comfortable showing his face to the agent even though it compromised his secret civilian identity.

'I've got a bad feeling about this,' said Don.

'I'm not sure why,' Scorpio replied.

Don looked sideways at him and smirked. 'You're a little short for a stormtrooper.'

Scorpio looked blank. At five foot eleven, he was exactly as tall as Don.

Don shook his head, and started to believe that Strikeforce's story about being from a different century might be true.

The transport sped on. There was no escort, nothing that might scare away the Anarchists. If they were attacked, Don and Strikeforce were on their own.

The attack came from the east. A helicopter, hugging the ground, popped up over a ridge and launched a missile. It struck the road in front of the transport, blasting a large crater. Don swerved and braked, fighting the wheel to prevent the transport from fishtailing or, worse, toppling on to its side.

‘Sonuva—’

‘Helicopter to the east,’ said Scorpio, his Strikeforce communicator carrying his words to those in the back of the vehicle.

A moment later, leaping over the same ridge came the plummeting bulk of Cosmos. Either by luck or design, he landed behind the transport just as Don brought it to safe halt. Reaching up, he dug his fingers into the armoured rear doors and literally ripped them from their hinges. Inside, he saw what he perceived to be his comrades, Neutron and the Dragon, accompanied by an armed DICE agent.

‘Ey Neutron!’ he bellowed. ‘I’m rescuing you!’

‘Neutron’ burst out of the vehicle, cancelling his illusion spell so Cosmos could see that it was Avatar smashing into him like a battering ram. Avatar had forgotten the man-monster’s massive metallic density, however, and Cosmos stood immobile while Avatar ricocheted back into the body of the transport. The ‘DICE agent’, revealed as Electron, braced himself within the body of the vehicle and blasted Cosmos with the maximum energy he could summon, but the monster stood barely affected.

‘What are you doing?’ Cosmos shouted in evident confusion, his diminished mental capacity not yet caught up with reality.

Nightflyer, divested of his ‘Dragon’ disguise, leaped out of the vehicle, slipped past Cosmos, and looked around for other Anarchists. The attack helicopter had landed and a small squad of armed men disembarked. Reminding himself that the purpose of the exercise wasn’t to defeat them but to drive them off so that Avatar could trail them to their base, Nightflyer sprinted in their direction. As he did, another figure dropped from the helicopter. This one was encased in gleaming silver armour, and raised an arm that had a small missile launcher attached. A brace of missiles bracketed Nightflyer and exploded, the concussion throwing him from his feet. ‘I might have no choice in letting them go,’ he thought as he somersaulted in mid air to regain his footing.

In the cab, Scorpio had pulled up his cowl to conceal his features, and he and Don had drawn their weapons.

‘Make it look good, but remember they have to get away,’ Scorpio cautioned. But at that moment, his attention was taken by a red-clad, caped figure that descended from the sky directly in front of the cab. The costume didn’t match with any Anarchist Scorpio had encountered or read about, and the bold, white ‘W’ emblem on his chest didn’t give any clues.

Before either Scorpio or Don could react, the newcomer had reached out, dug his fingers into the vehicle’s front armour, and was swinging the entire ten-ton truck up over his head.

‘Look—’ began Scorpio, instinctively twisting his body across Don’s to protect the agent from injury.

‘—out!’ he finished from the cover of a nearby ditch. He blinked in confusion, raising his head to verify that he was indeed in a roadside ditch, some distance away from the ongoing fight, with Don pinned under him. Had he blacked out?

He saw the red-caped figure swing the truck down, smashing it into the immovable object that was Cosmos. The truck crumpled, while Cosmos seemed barely fazed. If Scorpio and Don had still been in there ...

‘What the hell?’ said Don. ‘Did I black out?’

‘No, I—wait, you mean you didn’t get us out of there?’

‘I have no idea what happened.’

With a crackle of electricity, Electron and Avatar appeared a few metres away from them. Electron had obviously teleported them all clear of the truck an instant before the impact, thought Scorpio.

'Thanks for the save,' he called to Electron.

'What? No. I teleported *us* out not you. What are you talking about?'

Over on the road, Cosmos tore off a large section of the chassis and hurled it back at the caped figure, smashing him backwards. His target shrugged it off, rose into the air, and twin red laser beams came from his eyes, blazing away at Cosmos and causing the monster to bellow in rage and pain.

'So the red cape is on our side?' asked Scorpio, now confused about everything.

'He's not an Anarchist,' said Don. 'We've got a file on him but I can't tell you much. Seems to be on our side. Calls himself Captain Wonder.'

'He's a captain in your army?' asked Avatar.

'No. It's not a rank, it's a title.'

'That's very common for this era's heroes,' said Electron. 'Captain Light, Major Disaster, Captain Birdseye ... it's reassuring for civilians to think they are authority figures.'

Scorpio filed away this piece of information, as well as the question of how he had teleported, for later consideration. Right now there were more important matters to worry about.

'The Anarchists are supposed to escape. If this Captain Wonder—'

At that moment, Cosmos raised an arm and fired a massive blast of energy at 'Captain Wonder', this time stunning him enough that he dropped out of the sky, plummeting to the road surface.

'Never mind.'

Cosmos began to stomp down the road towards the stunned man, and Scorpio began to worry they would have to stop him themselves. This was all going wrong.

'My plan's all going wrong!' said Avatar despairingly.

They became aware of an amplified voice from the Anarchists' helicopter, calling Cosmos's name insistently. Cosmos stopped, shuffled indecisively while glaring at his downed foe, and then leaped back towards where his comrades were summoning him. In a few seconds, all the Anarchists had all boarded their helicopter and it took off.

'Avatar!' said Scorpio urgently. The demon didn't need to be told. With a muttered word, he released his astral body, which sped off after the helicopter. His physical body slumped and Scorpio barely caught it to lower it gently to the ground.

'Is that it?' asked Don.

'Uh-huh,' said Electron.

'As I understand it, his astral form travels as fast as he wants it to, is invisible, and can pass through anything,' said Scorpio. 'Wherever that chopper stops, he'll be there.'

'But we need to keep this body safe,' said Electron, raising his wrist communicator. 'Computer, set the teleport beam here.'

'Confirmed.'

With that taken care of, Scorpio walked over to where Captain Wonder was slowly regaining his feet. He was surprised to see that the hero was a youth, probably not out of his teens. Scorpio made sure to walk in a casual manner, not wanting to provoke a further fight.

'Where'd he go?' Wonder asked. Scorpio didn't know 20th-century dialects well enough to recognise the accent as Australian.

'Easy, son, the fight's over,' he said. 'That's some ... impressive power you've got there. But maybe you need to stop and think before you recklessly endanger lives?'

'Hey, *they* were attacking *you*, you ought to thank me for saving you!'

'And you "saved" us by smashing ... oh, never mind.'

'Yeah, right mate. You're welcome.' With a swirl of cape, the youth flew into the air and streaked away with impressive speed. Scorpio shook his head. Somebody needed to take reckless kids like that under their wing and stop them being a danger to everyone, he thought.

Nightflyer came limping up to him.

'Don't worry, I'm fine,' he said.

'I can see.'

'That was sarcasm! I just had to fight a dozen goons on my own!'

'We weren't *supposed* to fight them, the plan was ... oh, forget it.' With too much on his mind to stand and bicker with Nightflyer, Scorpio turned and walked away.

'What's got into him?' Nightflyer asked Electron.

'Not sure. Something weird happened in the fight. Don?'

'Search me. I'm just here to drive the bus.'

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Invisible and intangible, Avatar followed close behind the helicopter as it hugged the ground and made several wide turns, presumably to disguise its route from conventional pursuers. He soon began to realise that their actual course was a wide swing round to the north and then east of Los Angeles, avoiding the metropolis's built-up areas.

On the edge of the eastern suburbs, the helicopter, still flying at, or even below, tree-top level, approached a low, round hill that rose sharply from the surrounding scrubland, not overlooked by any nearby habitations. A growth of trees fringed the top, but the summit was bare and Avatar soon saw why. At the last minute, huge, camouflaged doors on the very top of the hill slid open and the chopper dropped inside. The doors closed just as rapidly, leaving Avatar outside, but that didn't stop him. His astral form could pass through solid metal or rock as easily as air, and so he flew down directly into the solid top of the hill.

He hit a solid barrier and ricocheted off, bounced down the hill and intangibly through several tree trunks, and lay dazed, floating a few feet about the ground.

He shook his head, clearing his thoughts, and tried to work out what had happened. Then he moved forward cautiously and probed the hillside with an outstretched arm. As expected, his arm passed through grass, soil and rock.

And then his fingers encountered something solid.

He moved around, testing the extent of the barrier. It was unbroken, sitting inside the hillside like a ... a ...

Avatar realised what it was. He had encountered something like it before, in the Haley Hotel a few weeks ago. And suddenly many things became clear. With a word, Avatar negated the spell that kept his astral body separated, feeling his consciousness immediately snap back to his physical body, now many thousand miles away.

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❖ Strikeforce Space Station

Electron, Scorpio and Nightflyer had propped the comatose Avatar in one of the conference chairs while they discussed the morning's events.

'I tell you, I teleported,' said Scorpio. 'Don was there. It's the only explanation.'

'We were supposed to tell each other about *all* our powers,' said Electron. 'Remember?'

'I swear, I didn't know I could do this. I still don't understand how I did.'

'Well, try teleporting now. But not too far, there's a vacuum outside. Just a couple of metres.'

Scorpio stood staring across the room. 'Nothing,' he admitted finally. 'How do you teleport anyway?'

'I just ... visualise the place and ... I can't explain, It's like explaining how you make yourself walk ... you just do it.'

Scorpio clenched his teeth and narrowed his eyes.

'Close your eyes,' suggested Nightflyer. Scorpio tried this, and still nothing happened.
'Maybe it's stress-related?' Electron said. 'You were trapped, trying to save yourself and Don ...'
'Stand still and I'll shoot you with your blaster,' offered Nightflyer.
He was saved Scorpio's retort by Avatar suddenly jerking awake.
'I know where they are!' the demon said.

To be continued ...