

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter 16: The Hill, Part II

- ❖ East Los Angeles
- ❖ "The Hill": suspected Anarchist base
- ❖ Thursday 4 February 1988
- ❖ 11pm

The DICE agent code-named Huey worked silently and efficiently by torchlight, removing the lock panel and attaching a small electronic device he had designed specifically for the purpose. Around him, the four members of Strikeforce stood alert, calm but anxious to get into action.

There was a small click, followed by the louder clunk of heavy-duty locking bolts sliding back. Luey nodded at Avatar, who lifted the heavy steel hatch open with one finger.

'Remember, stealth is the priority,' said Scorpio, unnecessarily reminding the team of the plan.

'Until we're discovered, then speed,' added Nightflyer.

Leaving Luey and his small team of agents to guard the entrance, Strikeforce moved into the Hill.

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- ❖ DICE Headquarters, Los Angeles
- ❖ Six days earlier

A large plan of the city was spread out on the table of the main conference room. Around it stood Major Eastwood, several of his top agents, and Strikeforce.

Avatar was recounting in detail how he had trailed the Anarchists to their hidden base, while the agents attempted to relate his description to a location on the map. Eventually they identified a small wilderness area bordering the eastern suburbs of the city.

'That certainly matches your description of a hill,' said Don.

'I can't believe it, not so close to the city,' said Eastwood. 'How did a blasted underground facility get built there without anyone noticing?'

'More to the point,' interjected the practically-minded Huey, 'How did they find a square of wilderness in the suburbs that hasn't been built on? Land out there's like gold.'

'That's DoD land,' said Luey.

'Really?' Eastwood raised an eyebrow. 'How come I didn't know that?' It was a genuine question, not a challenge to Luey's knowledge. Years as a motorcycle cop prior to joining DICE meant that Luey knew the city better than any of them.

'DoD?' asked Avatar.

'Department of Defense. Military,' explained Scorpio.

'Oh, *those* guys,' said Avatar disdainfully.

‘It was DoD before the ’burbs reached out that far. Back in the 50s, I think, it was supposed to be a nuclear fallout shelter, but I never heard of anyone using it, and I guess it just got forgotten. Suburbs crept up to it but developers couldn’t build on it, so it’s just sitting there.’

‘And the Anarchists just moved in to *our* base that we forgot about?’ Eastwood shook his head, feelings of anger and admiration for the Anarchists’ boldness competing with each other.

‘The important thing is, we know where it is and we can storm it,’ said Nightflyer. ‘Let’s go now while it’s dark.’

‘Hold on,’ cautioned Electron. ‘I’m as keen as anyone, but as we’re pretty sure they have hostages in there ...’

‘He’s right,’ said Eastwood. ‘They’ve been there a long time, they’re not going anywhere now. So nobody goes blundering in until we have a plan. That’s an order. Understood?’ He glared around at Strikeforce, daring them to object.

‘I’m all about the plans,’ said Nightflyer cheerfully. Electron snorted and Nightflyer gave him an innocent look.

‘Good. Then I’m putting the place under surveillance for a few days—that’s a job for my boys, not you—and we’ll see what we’re up against.’

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Several days passed while plainclothes DICE agents observed the suburban ‘hill’. It covered several acres and was surrounded by a high fence. But the gate in the fence, though it bore a new padlock, showed no signs of being used. They knew that a hatch in the top of the hill admitted helicopters, but there had to be some ground entrance for vehicles and men, surely? The DoD plans showed a sizeable facility that could conceivably house dozens of men as well as weapons and vehicles.

The puzzle was solved when agent Dewey observed that groups of men would enter a nearby private gymnasium, ostensibly to play basketball—and would not re-emerge after any reasonable amount of time. Eastwood reluctantly allowed Avatar to investigate in his invisible, immaterial astral form, and the demon confirmed that there was an underground access from the gym to the hill. But the mystical barrier that kept astral bodies out of the hill itself extended underground, and he was unable to travel the full length of the tunnel. He could, however, determine that the entrance to the tunnel was permanently guarded. Strikeforce came up with several scenarios for how they could storm the tunnel, but all of them were shot down by Eastwood and Don as being too risky to the hostages in the hill.

The breakthrough came from Luey and Huey, who had spent their days poring over vintage plans of the cold-war base and surveys of the surrounding land. They had identified a small secondary tunnel, part of the original base design but not included on the official DoD plans. A quick reconnoitre of the area located a secured access hatch concealed behind a rusted gate in a gulley almost half a mile from the hill. The hatch had a modern-looking electronic lock and alarm system but no human guards. It was the obvious entry point. A plan was quickly worked out, for Strikeforce to enter the Hill (by now they had taken to referring to it in capitals) by stealth, secure any hostages, and open the main hangar doors for Eastwood’s agents to enter and finish off any Anarchist resistance.

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❖ The Hill

Avatar carried Scorpio and Electron and flew down the narrow tunnel, Nightflyer keeping pace on foot. It was dark, the only light coming from torches carried by Nightflyer and Scorpio. Avatar suddenly stopped, and asked Scorpio to play his light over the floor. Scorpio saw what appeared to be a chalk line

drawn across the width of tunnel floor. Nightflyer had run right over it, not even noticing it, but Avatar still seemed wary. The demon scuffed his foot on the floor, obliterating part of the outline.

‘Just in case,’ was the only explanation he gave, then continued flying down the tunnel.

At the end, they encountered another door, but this had no obvious locks nor alarms. Trusting his intuition to warn him if he was about to trigger anything bad, Nightflyer took hold of the handle and swung it open. The hinges made an alarmingly loud squealing, evidence that they were right about this tunnel being unused, but it opened without any evidence that they had set off an actual alarm.

They were now in the main part of the underground base, and found it to be a complex of well-lit tunnels lined with concrete and metal. The walls and floors looked like they were barely ever cleaned, and the air had the recycled quality that they were used to from their own space station (although much more smelly, Electron would point out later). Nightflyer took point and moved swiftly but silently down the corridor.

They reached a stairwell and ascended it without any sign that they had been discovered. At the top, corridors branched three ways. Now it got tricky, as the chance of discovery increased. And although they had a general knowledge of the base’s layout from the plans, they didn’t know how the Anarchists were actually using it and thus where they—and more crucially, their hostages—would be.

Scorpio looked at Nightflyer, who without hesitation said, ‘Left.’ Scorpio nodded, and Nightflyer sped left.

‘Avatar, go right, Electron, with me,’ said Scorpio. With multiple objectives to accomplish, they were forced to split up at this point, as they had agreed during their advance planning.

❖ Nightflyer

Nightflyer’s objective was the most uncertain, as the DoD plans had given no clues about where the hostages might be kept, but he had trusted his intuition to guide him to where he needed to be. Stopping suddenly at an intersection, he peeked round the corner to see two armed guards at a sealed door. Reasoning that you only guarded a room in your own base if you didn’t want the occupants to escape from it, Nightflyer decided those occupants had to be the people he was here to rescue.

Taking a couple of small steel balls out of one of his suit’s pouches, he spun around the corner and hurled them down the corridor at the two guards. With intuitive accuracy, each of his missiles struck a guard’s head, sending the two men reeling. Before they could recover, Nightflyer had covered the length of the corridor and finished them off with precise blows.

He faced the door and waved his hand over an access panel, hoping it wasn’t keyed to a palm print. It wasn’t, and the door slid open. He saw a sterile, white room containing medical equipment and a number of sleeping—or sedated—figures.

At that moment, an alarm claxon sounded throughout the base.

‘That wasn’t me!’ he said in annoyance.

‘Sorry,’ came Avatar’s voice over the communicator. ‘But you should see this. They’ve got tanks and rockets and every—oh, hold on—’

A rumbling explosion cut his voice off.

❖ Avatar

Avatar’s objective was to open the roof hatch, by brute force if necessary, and let in Eastwood’s agents. So in one way it was the easiest mission, as the plans had shown exactly where that was. In another way it was the hardest, as he was likely to meet the toughest resistance.

Triggering his force field belt for added protection, Avatar flew into the base’s central hanger. The place was huge, literally cavernous, and filled with vehicles. He saw attack helicopters, several armoured

fighting vehicles, and some things that might have been either aircraft or hovercraft. Several men moved around the space, performing various maintenance operations.

Avatar flew silently high above the floor, near the domed metal ceiling. He could see the outline of the roof doors, and was debating how to open them when his luck ran out. A shout from the ground drew his attention, and he glanced down to see a man pointing directly at him. Others were now looking too, and several had pulled side arms. Bullets and energy beams splashed off his force field and he yawned theatrically.

Then one of the men hit a large red button, and pandemonium broke out.

‘That wasn’t me!’ came Nightflyer’s annoyed voice over the communicator.

‘Sorry,’ Avatar said. ‘But you should see this. They’ve got tanks and rockets and every—oh, hold on—’

One of the Anarchists had produced a long metal tube, a shoulder-fired anti-aircraft missile launcher, and had Avatar in its sights. Before Avatar could react, the missile streaked towards him and exploded in his face. The force field protected him, but the overload caused it to shut down and the impact sent him spinning head over heels.

Realising he was suddenly vulnerable to blaster fire, Avatar quickly recovered his balance and accelerated to his full speed. Weaving between blasts and landing among the armed men, he proceeded to lay about him with his fists. Holding back his full strength so he didn’t kill any of the men, he wasn’t as efficient a hand-to-hand fighter as Nightflyer or Scorpio, and had barely dealt with the small group when he saw another heavily-armed bunch approaching down the corridor. Picking up the Anarchist’s discarded rocket launcher, he held the now-inert tube sideways in front of him and flew at the knot of reinforcements. The improvised plough knocked the front two down and Avatar carried on, physically pushing the knot of men back along the corridor. Then one end of the tube caught in protruding pipes at the side of the corridor, jammed fast, bent, and snapped, the sudden jerk throwing Avatar off balance and onto the ground. By the time he had regained his feet, he was surrounded by armed men and had no room to fly clear and no time to unleash any kind of spell.

‘I could really use some backup,’ he said into his communicator as he prepared to fight his way clear.

❖ Electron and Scorpio

Electron and Scorpio were to locate the underground entrance tunnel and secure it as a possible evacuation route for the hostages if anything went wrong. They had found it easily enough, though it was more impressive than the plans had suggested. They were standing on what felt almost like an underground station platform, looking down into a wide, straight tunnel which led both left and right, north-east and south-west. A single metal rail ran down the centre of the tunnel floor.

‘Monorail,’ suggested Scorpio.

‘Yes, and mind the rail, it’s carrying a massive current.’

‘At least it’s not guarded. But it would be useful if the train was here, we could use it to carry out the hostages.’

‘That console might have a way to remotely summon it.’

The alarm claxon sounded while they were examining the control panel.

‘That wasn’t me!’

‘Sorry. But you should see this. They’ve got tanks and rockets and every—oh, hold on—’

Boom.

‘That’s blown it,’ said Electron. ‘Nightflyer, what’s your situation?’

‘I found hostages. Uh, Professor Zod, two women, and I think this is the Great Bear. None of them are mobile, I can’t get them out of here.’

Scorpio and Electron exchanged glances.

‘Stay put, we’re coming. Computer, can you guide us to Nightflyer’s location?’ said Scorpio.

‘Confirmed.’

‘I could really use some backup,’ said Avatar.

‘Did you let Eastwood in?’

‘No. Did I mention they have rockets?’

‘Electron, can you reach Avatar?’

Electron frowned under his full-face mask, calculating distances from memory. ‘Yes ... I can’t take you though. Not on a blind teleport.’

‘Go. I’ll go to Nightflyer the slow way.’

In a burst of static electricity, Electron vanished.

❖ Electron and Avatar

Electron was taking a huge risk teleporting without seeing his destination. He had spent some time committing the base’s plans to memory for just such an eventuality, so he knew the distance and direction he needed to travel. But that didn’t remove the chance of appearing partly inside a solid object, the consequences of which would have been fatal.

His luck held, and he appeared in a clear space within the vehicle hanger. Fighting down the light-headedness and disorientation he always felt after a teleport, he took stock of the situation. To one side, Avatar was almost swamped by a mass of men who were attempting to bodily restrain him or club him unconscious. They were only human, individually no match for him, but Electron could see he was holding back to avoid causing them serious injury, and they were more than willing to exploit this weakness.

Meanwhile, the hangar doors remained closed. Ignoring Avatar’s plight for a moment, Electron carefully examined the room for a likely opening mechanism. He soon spotted a control station on a high gantry, and a large red lever that could only have one purpose. Reaching out telekinetically, he grasped it firmly with his mind and pulled.

Despite their massive bulk, the hangar doors opened smoothly and relatively quietly.

Within seconds, the hangar was full of DICE agents abseiling down from hovering helicopters, Eastwood himself leading the assault.

Electron relaxed, and turned to where Avatar was still struggling. A bolt of electricity threw the Anarchists in all directions, and with a heave Avatar regained his feet and finally flew clear.

‘DICE are in,’ Electron said into his communicator. ‘Mission accomplished.’

‘Easy for you to say,’ said Nightflyer. ‘Some of us still have hostages to protect.’

An ear-splitting wail came from Electron’s communicator, threatening to blow the speaker. Electron looked at it in some alarm. ‘What was that?’

❖ Nightflyer

Nightflyer examined the four sleeping figures. Each was connected to a medical drip, presumably keeping them sedated. Monitor panels by each bed showed oscilloscope traces that meant nothing to Nightflyer. But all the traces were regular and nothing was flashing red, so he guessed they were all in good condition. The beds were of the hospital trolley variety, flimsy affairs on wheels, but moving four of them from here was going to be problematical, unless he could find some way to wake the occupants.

‘Nightflyer, what’s your situation?’

‘I found hostages,’ he said into his communicator. ‘Uh, Professor Zod, two women, and I think this is the Great Bear. None of them are mobile, I can’t get them out of here.’

‘Stay put, we’re coming.’

Nightflyer examined the figures more closely. One was unmistakably Zod, the elderly physicist they had failed to save from the Anarchists some months ago. The man looked frail and pale, and Nightflyer was fairly certain he wouldn't be able to walk far even if awake.

Next to him was a woman—a girl, he corrected himself, probably no older than sixteen. Her pale complexion was only heightened by the rich auburn hair framing her face. Nightflyer felt he should be making a connection here, but it eluded him.

Even if he hadn't he recognised the third person from DICE files, he would have deduced who it was: the eight foot, hair-covered mass of muscle could only be the Russian super-human agent, the Great Bear. Having encountered some other Russian supers recently, Nightflyer was in no hurry to wake this one up.

The fourth figure was another puzzle. Like the Great Bear, she was hair-covered, but was much smaller, a lithe figure with facial features that resembled a cat. Nightflyer had no idea who she might be or why the Anarchists were holding her.

'DICE are in,' came from the communicator. 'Mission accomplished.'

'Easy for you to say,' he said. 'Some of us still have hostages to protect.'

His intuition warned him a fraction of a second before the attack came. He ducked as an ear-splitting high-pitched scream tore through the air like a physical force, and actually buckled the metal wall panel where it struck. He spun and looked through the open door into the corridor. He saw a blonde woman in a tight-fitting silver costume, who was inhaling for another scream. Digging into a pouch, he withdrew a small pellet and threw it at the woman's feet. It exploded into a cloud of smoke, and her inhale turned into a gasping choke. He had bought himself a second, enough to dash towards the door.

As he reached it, he saw another figure a few yards down the corridor, this one a man encased in metallic silver armour. It was the man he had fought on the highway a week ago, who DICE had identified as an Anarchist by the name of Silver Streak. Which presumably made the woman his partner, Siren. The name fitted.

Silver Streak raised an arm and his rocket launcher clicked into place. Nightflyer had been on the receiving end of the man's explosive concussion bombs before, and with alarm realised how vulnerable the helpless prisoners behind him were. Without thinking, he slammed his palm against the door's control panel, and the door slid shut between Nightflyer and his two attackers.

Silver Streak was firing as it closed, and his rocket struck the door, the blast sufficient to buckle and twist it in its frame.

Nightflyer braced himself for the inevitable attack through the door. There was a loud clang, metal on metal, and then another. The buckled door wouldn't open!

But it wouldn't take long for them to break it down, particularly once Siren recovered, and Nightflyer just wasn't physically equipped to fight an armoured foe like Silver Streak. He could dodge his attacks all day, but not while he was also protecting the hostages.

'I could do with backup here,' he said into his communicator, while his eyes scanned the room for something he could use as a weapon. Medical equipment and ... nothing, not even so much as a fire axe or sturdy bar that might dent armour. Then he caught sight of something he had overlooked earlier: a white circle chalked around the bed that held the pale young girl.

His intuitive abilities went into overdrive, making connections based on weeks of unconnected clues, and a plan clicked into place. Without fully understanding why, he used his boot to scuff the chalk mark, breaking the circle. Then, gripping the girl's trolley, he muttered, 'Please wake up, ghost girl,' and unceremoniously tipped her onto the floor.

❖ Astra

Astra's astral body floated in Wang's shop in San Francisco's Chinatown, drifting off to sleep after a long evening studying Chinese pictograms with the old man. Although she had no connection to a physical body to feel tired, her mind required sleep just like anybody else's.

'Please wake up, ghost girl.'

She started awake. Somebody had clearly spoken to her, but the back room of Wang's shop was empty.

Then she felt a bump, an actual physical sensation, something like falling out of bed onto a solid floor.

She gasped with sudden realisation. Scarcely daring to hope—and luckily not stopping to think how foolhardy she was being if she was wrong—she muttered the Latin words of the spell that would reunite her astral body with her real body.

❖ Astra and Nightflyer

The pale girl's eyes snapped open.

'Where am I?' she said, predictably.

'We don't have a lot of time. You can do magic?'

Astra focussed on the man who was kneeling over her, recognising him as Nightflyer.

'Yes.' She tried to stand but found her body's legs would not work. Nightflyer steadied her while she struggled to a sitting position.

'Don't stand, just, as soon as that door opens, there will be a big armoured guy and you need to blast him. Or whatever you do.'

Nightflyer had barely finished his speech when Siren's high-pitched scream sounded, and the door literally blew open, flying into the room and clattering against the wall. Nightflyer and Astra flinched, and when they looked up again, Silver Streak was in the doorway, both arm-mounted rocket launchers pointed at them.

'Him!' shouted Nightflyer.

Putting every bit of her willpower behind the words, Astra shouted some phrases in Chinese, and formed a complicated shape with the fingers of her left hand. Coloured streams of light left her fingers and flowed into—not into, *through*—Silver Streak, leaving no mark on his armour but clearly affecting him, as his body convulsed and dropped to the floor.

Siren was standing immediately behind him, anger contorting her face. She opened her mouth to scream.

Nightflyer grabbed the toppled bed and dragged it round to shield himself and Astra. Siren's scream battered it, but it held. Barely.

'Can you do it again?' he asked.

Astra shook her head.

From his crouching position, Nightflyer leaped over the bed, aiming a punch at Siren. With impressive agility, she tumbled backwards out of his reach, and let off a short scream that felt like a solid punch to his chest and sent him reeling. Worse, he saw Silver Streak unsteadily regaining his feet. He had been down, but not out.

Nightflyer placed himself between the Anarchists and Astra and prepared to do whatever it took to shield her.

To his surprise, Silver Streak was backing away and speaking.

'Siren, the base is lost. We need to abandon.'

Without a word, Siren moved to join him, and the two of them slipped out into the corridor and were gone.

Only seconds later, Scorpio and Don burst into the room shoulder-by-shoulder, ready for combat. Seeing only Nightflyer and Astra sitting quietly on the floor, they relaxed.

‘What took you?’ asked Nightflyer.

‘Oh, you know, just fighting an army of thugs,’ shrugged Scorpio. ‘Who’s your friend?’

‘That,’ said Nightflyer, ‘Is probably a long story.’

❖ Epilogue

Major Eastwood and his agents were picking through the wreckage of the Hill. Anarchists had all been dispersed to secure prison facilities, and Strikeforce had gone to ... wherever it was that Strikeforce went when the glamorous part of an operation was over. But there was still work for DICE to do. The battle had caused a lot of damage, and the Anarchists’ impressive arsenal of weapons and vehicles had to be checked and made safe.

‘You could fit our entire west coast operation in this place and still have room left over,’ said Don conversationally.

Eastwood grunted.

‘It makes our basement look pokey,’ Dewey agreed. ‘Seems a waste that the DoD are going to mothball it.’

Eastwood gave a non-committal shrug.

‘Man, these are sweet vehicles,’ said Luey, sliding out from under an armoured hovercraft. ‘Pity we don’t have room to garage them ourselves.’

Eastwood growled.

‘You should see the workshops!’ enthused Huey. ‘So much space!’

‘All right, all right! Enough already. I’ll talk to Ed and see if we can’t do a deal with the DoD.’

Eastwood turned away and Don and Huey high-fived behind his back.

He knew they were, of course. He had only turned away so they wouldn’t see his grin.

End.