

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter 17: Haven

- ❖ New Haven Hospital, Los Angeles
- ❖ 12 February 1988
- ❖ Strikeforce have rescued Carl Zod and Astra from The Hill, the secret Anarchist base.
- ❖ After weeks of forced sedation, both are currently under medical supervision.

Electron and Carla Zod stood at the bedside of her father, Carl. The old man appeared thin and frail, but his eyes were clear and his grip on Carla's hand was firm.

'They wanted me to build weapons for them,' he said, confusion in his voice. 'When they found I couldn't, they didn't seem to know what to do with me. It's a mercy they didn't kill me, I suppose. But ... Me! I'm a theoretician, I can't build anything. And weapons! Never!'

'They probably read about your work on the Manhattan Project,' said Carla.

'Yes, but that was ... everybody was ... I ...' Professor Zod trailed off into muttering to himself.

'You're under police guard and the whole building is being watched by DICE agents,' Electron said, to change the subject. 'And one of us will be around as much as possible. We're sure the Anarchists won't make another attempt on you, but if they do you'll be safe. Nothing can happen here.'

With impeccable timing, a roaring noise came from an adjacent room, not exactly an explosion, but something that made the whole building appear to shake.

'Don't move from here,' Electron warned them. He pulled his full-face hood over his head to complete his uniform and conceal his features, and slipped carefully out of the door.

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Avatar and Nightflyer were in the adjacent room with Alison, the teenage girl who had been coerced into working with the Anarchists. She was sitting up in bed and, despite her voice sounding hoarse from disuse, was talking enough to make up for months of silence. Avatar knew her story, but she was repeating it for Nightflyer's benefit, and elaborating on the version Avatar had first heard.

'So I don't know that much magic, not really. I got this chest of my grandmother's books on my birthday—last April—and before that I didn't even know magic was real. Anyway, it's easy, I learned it in a couple of weeks, you just have to say some words in Latin—'

'I don't speak Latin,' said Avatar, puzzled.

'Oh ... well, you can use Chinese too, Wang has been teaching me that.'

Avatar looked unconvinced.

'Anyway, magic's really easy—'

Avatar's bemusement just grew. Magic was second nature to him, but he was a demon, magic was in his essence. There were almost no humans who could cast spells, and he didn't believe any should be able to learn magic in 'a couple of weeks' from books.

I started with some simple tricks, then I found the spell that released my astral body. So cool! I could go anywhere! But that was where it all went wrong. Hellfire—the German guy—he found me somehow, and trapped my body while I was in astral form. Then hid it and I was trapped. Then they forced me to work for them. I hated it but they threatened my body and I had to. I called myself Astra, it's Latin, it means "star", but now I think I won't use that again because, well.'

'It's a good name,' Nightflyer smiled when she finally paused for breath.

'Oh. Ok. Well, I don't expect I'll need a secret identity now, even if I was going to use magic again, which I'm not. Never again.'

'What *are* you going to do?' asked Avatar.

'Oh. I don't know.' She sounded genuinely puzzled, as if the thought had never occurred to her. She was a minor, with no family, no place to live, and no income. 'But you know what I really want now? Chocolate ice cream!'

A doctor chose that moment to enter the room. He had obviously overheard the last part of the conversation.

'You can eat anything, but in moderation for now,' he said. He picked up the chart hanging on the end of her bed and scanned it. 'You'll be in here a few more days at least. You haven't used your muscles for months, by the look of it, and you'll need extensive physio before you can even walk again. But your progress is remarkable. Apart from the obvious muscle atrophy, I don't think I've seen such a healthy young woman.'

With no warning, the wall behind the doctor blurred and then vanished, to be replaced to a gaping portal onto a swirling chaos of red and black clouds. A roaring noise, somewhere between wind and thunder, filled their ears, and jagged bolts of lightning spewed out into the room. Nightflyer began to move but, quick as he was, Alison—Astra—was faster. She spoke a single syllable, and a glowing shield appeared between the doctor and the portal, deflecting the lightning.

Never going to use magic again, thought Nightflyer, smiling to himself.

To Nightflyer it felt as if the while building was shaking to its foundations. Avatar was speaking but his voice was inaudible above the roaring. Nightflyer reached the doctor and swept him into a corner of the room, away from whatever else might emerge. He hoped Avatar was protecting Alison in similar fashion.

Then a giant hand reached through the portal and grabbed not Astra or the doctor but Avatar, wrapping massive fingers around the demon in an unbreakable grip. As quickly as it emerged, it withdrew, dragging Avatar with it. Nightflyer hurled himself towards the portal, but it had already closed and he thudded into a solid wall. The roaring abruptly stopped.

Electron burst into the room. 'What the chew?'

'I don't know. Call Scorpio down, we've got a problem.'

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Scorpio was on call on the space station and beamed down within seconds of receiving the alert. Nightflyer quickly briefed him and Electron on what had happened, then spoke to Alison.

'You're our magic expert, Astra,' he said, deliberately using her chosen code name. 'What was that?'

The girl blushed. 'I don't know. I'm not really an expert. Wang would know.'

'Wang?'

'He's been helping me with magic, he knows loads. But—'

Without warning, a man appeared in the room. Not physically appeared, they realised, this was a pale, ghostly shadow, the way Avatar had sometimes appeared to them in astral form. The form sat in the lotus position, but hovered in the air so that his head was level with theirs. He was a slight, shrunken figure almost buried by layers of heavy robes. He may have been Asian in origin, but his face was so lined

with age that it was hard to be certain. One thing they were sure of, however, was that the pentagram medallion he wore on a chain around his neck was the exact twin of the one that Avatar always wore.

He looked around the room, blinking, observing them but making no threatening move.

‘Wang?’ said Scorpio; guessing, but standing poised for action in case he was wrong.

‘Eh? No. You do me honour, but I am not that venerable personage. I am the Sorcerer.’ The voice was frail and cracked with age, and the accent again possibly pointing to an Asian origin.

‘A Sorcerer,’ said Scorpio. ‘That much is obvious. And your name is?’

‘As I said, the Sorcerer.’

Astra gasped.

‘Not *a* Sorcerer, *the* Sorcerer!’ she said. At their blank looks, she explained further, ‘He’s the Supreme Sorcerer of Earth. The greatest of them all.’

‘You’ve met him?’ Scorpio asked.

‘No! But Wang told me about him. It’s an honour, sir!’

The Sorcerer turned his piercing gaze on her and she blushed again. ‘We were fated to meet sooner or later, Astra,’ he said. She was too nervous to ask what that meant or how he even knew her name. Then he turned his eyes elsewhere, and she breathed again. He addressed the three Strikeforce members.

‘I am here because I detected a demonic incursion, but it appears I am too late. There has been something powerful here, but it has gone, correct?’

‘Our friend Avatar was grabbed by a giant hand and dragged through a portal, if that’s what you mean, said Electron.’

‘Avatar? Oh, now I see more clearly. Avatar is a demon?’

‘So he claims,’ said Scorpio, noncommittal.

‘And he has been pulled back to the Nether Regions where his kind belongs. That is good.’

‘No, it’s not good,’ said Electron. ‘He’s our friend and our team-mate and we want him back!’

The Sorcerer turned the full power of his gaze on Electron, appearing to look right into his soul. Electron swallowed uncomfortably, but held his resolve.

‘Avatar is a hero,’ he said.

‘A demon!’ insisted the Sorcerer. The being you think you see is an Earthly manifestation of a creature of pure thought. ‘Malevolent thought.’

‘His origin doesn’t matter, his deeds here and now define him,’ said Scorpio.

‘It’s true,’ said Astra, surprising herself by speaking up. ‘Wang thinks ...’ she tailed off when he looked at her again, and wished she could magic herself somewhere else.

‘There are more complexities here than I was aware of. Paradoxes, and wheels within wheels. I sense the hand of Karoona, but I cannot sense his motives.’ The Sorcerer seemed to be talking to himself now, not to them. His hand went to his amulet and grasped it. He was silent for several long seconds, and none of Strikeforce dared break the silence. Eventually he shook his head, and let the amulet fall back onto his chest.

‘You see my amulet? I know you have seen a similar one.’

‘Avatar wears one,’ Electron confirmed.

‘Most disturbing. There can only be one. Must only be one. And yet I sense it is what binds your demon here, to this time and place. But how? This is unclear.’

By unspoken consent, none of the Strikeforce members explained that they were time travellers. But they all realised that because of time travel Avatar’s amulet could be the same unique item the Sorcerer currently wore, brought back from a point in its future.

‘If Karoona wants Avatar, then we must foil him. We must retrieve him,’ said the Sorcerer at last.

‘That’s what we’ve been trying to tell you,’ said Nightflyer. ‘So how?’

‘Someone must journey to the Nether Regions and retrieve him.’

‘Why do I get the feeling that’s going to be us and not you?’ asked Scorpio.

‘Oh, I cannot go. Far too dangerous for me to place myself in Karoona’s grasp so openly.’

‘Well, there’s a surprise,’ said Electron. ‘So who is this Karoona you keep talking about?’

‘That is knowledge you are not ready for.’

‘Ok, forget that,’ said Nightflyer. ‘Whoever or whatever he is, we’ll deal with him when we meet him, same as we always do. Now I’m guessing you can send us to these Nether Regions?’

‘Oh no, beyond my power that is. But I can send you to Haven, and there your journey can start. If you agree to the quest?’

‘It seems we have little choice,’ said Scorpio. ‘When do we start?’

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Without any warning, the scene changed, leaving Scorpio, Nightflyer and Electron blinking in sudden sunlight. They stood in a landscape of rolling, grass-covered hills, dotted with small bushes, and with a small pond in a hollow just ahead of them. The sun stood high in a pure blue sky, warm but not uncomfortably hot, and a mild breeze fanned their faces. ‘Idyllic’ was the word that sprang to Scorpio’s mind. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw rabbits frolicking in the shade of a gorse bush. Somehow, the Sorcerer had transported them to the beautiful, unspoiled countryside of ... where?

No, not unspoiled countryside, he decided, as he registered more details of the scene. The grass had been cropped short with millimetre precision, and the pond was perfectly circular and edged with smooth, regular stone slabs. This was a man-made garden.

‘Stay alert,’ he said as he stepped towards the pond, which was the obvious focal point of the garden.

‘I was born alert,’ said Nightflyer.

‘This isn’t how I imagined a place called “the Nether Regions” would look,’ said Electron.

‘Welcome to Haven,’ came a soft, musical voice from off to one side, and as one they turned to look at a woman who had most definitely not been there a second before. She was tall, graceful, and uncommonly beautiful. Blonde hair dressed with delicate flowers cascaded down her back, and she gazed at them with piercing blue eyes. Her plain dress was pure white, long enough to touch the ground, and Electron thought the style was vaguely archaic.

‘Who are you and where is this?’ asked Scorpio, trying to keep his tone polite. There was nothing overtly threatening here, but still he felt uncomfortable.

‘I am Haven and you are in Haven.’

‘You or the place is called Haven?’ asked Electron.

‘That is so.’

‘So ... where are we, exactly?’

‘Haven.’

Strikeforce exchanged bemused glances. The woman seemed intent in speaking in riddles.

‘All right, *what* is Haven?’ Nightflyer tried.

‘Haven is the place where all realities touch, but none of them meet,’ came the unenlightening answer. ‘Here you may come to no harm, time will not pass for you, and all your needs are catered to. See.’ She lifted one elegant arm to point to one side. Where Strikeforce *knew* there had only been bare grass before, they now saw a large square of chequered cloth with a variety of food and drink laid out on it. Reality appeared to be malleable in this place. Scorpio saw a plate of apple pie, something he had developed a particular taste for in the 20th century. The others each saw something that appeared specifically tailored to tempt them.

‘Don’t eat anything,’ Electron cautioned.

‘I’m not getting a bad feeling about any of this,’ Nightflyer said.

Normally the team trusted Nightflyer’s intuition, but this time Scorpio said, ‘I’m getting a bad feeling about all of this.’ He raised his communicator bracelet. ‘Computer, do you have a fix on us?’

No response.

Electron turned to address the woman again. 'We are looking for our friend, Avatar,' he said. The woman only smiled. Electron tried again. 'Can you tell us where he is?'

'I can only tell you about Haven,' she said.

'And you're not making a very good job of that,' muttered Nightflyer. Electron shushed him.

'Ok ... where in Haven can we find ... how to find him?'

'You could ask the pool.'

'The pool.'

'Yes.'

'That pool there?'

'Yes.'

'And how is that going to help?'

'The pool holds all knowledge of all realities. It can answer any question you ask of it. But you may only ask it one question.'

'Each?' asked Electron, slyly.

'Yes.'

'This is ridiculous,' said Scorpio.

Nightflyer shrugged, and turned to the pool. 'Ok pool, where—'

Electron clamped his hand over Nightflyer's mouth. 'Stop!'

'What?' said Nightflyer, pulling away. 'I was going to ask where—'

Electron stopped him again. 'Wrong question!'

'But—'

'Did you never read fairy tales as a kid?' Nightflyer's blank look told him the answer was no, and Electron remembered that Nightflyer had been artificially grown to adulthood. He suddenly felt vaguely sad on his friend's behalf.

'Wish fulfilment is always literal,' he said. 'You were going to ask where is Avatar, and the pool would have said, in the Nether Regions, but we already know that. You'd waste your question.'

'That's ridiculous,' said Nightflyer, echoing Scorpio's earlier sentiment.

'Ok, fine, try it and see.'

While Nightflyer hesitated, Scorpio, digesting what Electron had said but only half believing it, turned to the pool and said, 'Pool, how do we get to the Nether Regions?'

They felt that the answer came from the pool, and had the sense of words being spoken underwater, but the words seemed to enter their minds rather than their ears.

'To get to the Nether Regions, you must follow your feet.'

They waited for the pool to add to the cryptic remark, but it remained silent.

'Is that it?' asked Nightflyer, hurriedly adding, 'That wasn't my question!'

'Riddles. Marvellous,' said Scorpio in disgust. 'Follow our feet? What does that mean?'

Nightflyer looked down at his feet. 'Go downwards?' he looked around. 'Into the pool?'

'Jumping into the pool sounds particularly stupid, let's not try it,' said Scorpio. He looked at the woman. 'Is this whole place an elaborate trap? To stop us reaching Avatar?'

The woman shook her head but said nothing.

'That makes no sense,' said Electron. 'Even if the Sorcerer was lying, he didn't need to send us here to keep us from Avatar, we didn't have a clue where to go anyway. And he seemed pretty confident that this was where he needed to send us. So, follow our feet ... to me that means, just walk.'

'Which direction?' asked the pragmatic Scorpio.

'Maybe it doesn't matter? What did she say? All realities touch here?' Electron looked at the woman, who smiled and nodded. 'You can tell us about Haven, you said, so tell us how to get out of it.'

'You form the idea of where you want to go, and go there.'

Electron looked at his companions, who both shrugged.

'Think of going to the Nether Regions and walk?' asked Nightflyer.

‘What have we got to lose?’

‘Join hands,’ said Scorpio, ‘I don’t want us all thinking of something different and getting separated in different ... realities, whatever that might mean.’

Hand in hand, they started walking away from the pool, each thinking some variation of ‘I want to go the Nether Regions.’

Without them being aware of exactly when it happened, the scene shifted again.

To be continued ...