

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter 1B: Karoona

- ❖ 12 February 1988
- ❖ I have lost all contact with Strikeforce.
- ❖ I am a model GM-1 Intelligence Matrix with 10^{18} parallel neural nodes and a data storage of 107 petabytes. I am the most intelligent computer entity in this century.
- ❖ I do not share illogical, Human-centric belief systems.
- ❖ However, I believe Strikeforce are currently in Hell.

The blue sky and pastoral countryside were gone. Electron, Nightflyer and Scorpio were walking down a rough, narrow tunnel drilled through solid stone. Everything was bathed in a lurid red glow that seemed to come from somewhere ahead of them. The heat was oppressive, the air heavy with fumes that were painful to breathe in.

‘Now this says “Nether Regions” to me,’ said Electron.

They walked in silence for a distance that was hard to judge—the chronometers in their communicator bracelets had frozen, presumably since they had first entered Haven. Eventually, they came to a variation in the monotonous tunnel, as it bent sharply at a near right angle. Side by side, they cautiously stepped around the corner. The tunnel continued, but there seemed to be something different ahead of them. As they squinted into the red haze, Nightflyer suddenly grabbed each of his companions and threw himself backwards, pulling them with him, back around the corner.

The tunnel ahead of them filled with roaring red flame. It didn’t reach around the corner, but if Nightflyer hadn’t reacted they would have been thoroughly toasted.

‘Pretty effective barrier,’ said Electron after the flame had subsided.

‘I’m not sure it’s a simple barrier,’ said Scorpio. ‘A second before the flame, I saw a movement. Something down there with flame powers deliberately attacked us.’

‘I’m going to look,’ said Nightflyer. Before either of his comrades could react, he was around the corner and running down the tunnel. He had covered barely twenty yards when a mass of flame came roaring down towards him. Spinning, he moved back towards the corner as fast as he could manage. Not fast enough. He sensed the flames at his back and threw himself flat. Agony seared every nerve of his back. As swiftly as they had appeared the flames abated, and Nightflyer instinctively rolled over several times, assuming his costume must be on fire. Stumbling to his feet, he staggered the last few yards around the corner.

Collapsing to the ground, he sat breathing heavily while he allowed his enhanced healing to deal with the burns. It was only then that he realised there were no burns, and no damage to his costume.

He thought about how Astra’s magical blast had injured Silver Streak while leaving no mark on his armour, and realised this was something similar. Not actual fire, but magical energy.

Still, no less deadly. A man without Nightflyer’s super-human vitality wouldn’t have survived that attack. And that included Electron and Scorpio.

They had waited for him to recover before pressing him with questions, so he quickly summarised what he had seen.

‘It’s a big, rock chamber. Maybe twenty metres across. I think the tunnel continues beyond it, it wasn’t clear. But the chamber is basically a pit of molten lava. We’re not walking across it. I think our best bet is for Electron to teleport us from here.’

‘Blind, without knowing the exact distances? We’ll die, either from appearing inside rock or dropping into lava. And I probably won’t survive a ’port of that distance with passengers anyway. Can we get closer?’

‘Not unless we can take out the fire breather first.’

‘So it is an attacker?’ asked Scorpio.

‘A creature of some kind, huge, much bigger than a man. It’s sitting on a rocky pedestal in the middle of the lava. And you two aren’t fast enough to get to it before it roasts you.’

‘Ok. How are we going to handle this?’ asked Scorpio.

‘Give me your blaster.’

‘What?’

‘Your blaster. You’re not fast enough to get into a firing position, but I am.’

Scorpio thought it over, judging distances and timing, and saw that Nightflyer was right. To get a reliably clear shot he would have to be almost at the far end of the tunnel, and at his best speed he couldn’t do it before the creature roasted him. Nightflyer might. With the key word being ‘might’.

Reluctantly, he un-holstered his weapon and handed it to Nightflyer.

‘There’s no stun setting, it’s designed for killing attacks,’ he said.

‘The thing’s a demon, I’m not worried about killing it. I’m not even sure we can kill it. I just want to knock it into the pit of lava long enough for us to get past it.’ Nightflyer took the blaster, checked the safety was off, and braced himself. He hadn’t covered the full distance the first time, but he had been moving cautiously. This time, he was going to sprint flat out. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

In a straight sprint, Nightflyer could reach almost 200 kilometres per hour. Streaking down the tunnel, he got the sense that the huge beast at the end was turning its head to face him. But the rippling red heat haze made it hard to see clearly, and he couldn’t risk to waste the shot. He had to be closer to make sure of it.

Right to the rim of the lava pit he ran, skidding to a halt to face the hulking, stone-like, inhuman guardian. It opened its huge maw and Nightflyer saw flickering flames within.

The heat was intolerable. Sweat ran freely into his eyes, and he wiped them clear before taking a two-handed grip on the blaster. It was a fatal error. His hands, slick with sweat, slipped on the grip, and the blaster tumbled into the pit below him. For a fraction of a second—an incredibly long time for Nightflyer—he gaped in disbelief as the weapon flared into non-existence. Then he moved.

He leaped out and sideways, over the lava pit, clearing the tunnel entrance just as the demon belched a pillar of fire down it. As he leaped, he dug his grappling line from a pouch. He twisted in the air, threw it upwards. The line wrapped around a stalactite-like projection and the small grapple wedged into a crack, holding firm, changing Nightflyer’s leap into a pendulum-like swing that had him clearing the lava by mere inches. As he swung, he shouted as loud as he could.

‘New plan! You need to blast it!’

With his swinging momentum, he could have cleared the pit and leaped into the opposite tunnel mouth, but he couldn’t afford to do that. He had to keep the demon’s attention on him and off Scorpio and Electron. He kicked off a wall and swung back, crossing the demon’s line of sight. When it breathed another flame blast, he twisted aside, barely moving out of its path. But his room for manoeuvrability was limited, and he couldn’t keep this dance up for long.

He didn’t have to. At his shout, Scorpio and Electron had moved without hesitation, running down the tunnel, not knowing what the situation was but trusting their team-mate. They reached the edge of the lava pit and instantly sized up the situation. The giant beast, distracted by the swinging Nightflyer, had its

back to them. Without conferring, each raised an arm and let loose their energy blasts: electricity from Electron and a bolt of concussive bio-electric force from Scorpio. Both blasts struck home, knocking the creature from its small pedestal. It dropped soundlessly into the lava pit, and vanished.

When Electron had telekinetically lifted Scorpio and himself across the pit, and Nightflyer had swung down to join them, Scorpio asked, 'What went wrong with the blaster?'

'Ah ...' said Nightflyer. 'About that ...'

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'You dropped my blaster into a lava pit!' said Scorpio accusingly for the umpteenth time. They had followed the continuation of the tunnel without incident for a considerable distance, and Scorpio didn't seem able to let the subject go.

'You never use it anyway,' said Nightflyer.

'That's not the point! It's property of the Special Police!'

'Right. I don't think we need to worry about that, we're never going back to the 24th century.'

'That's not the point!'

'Have you noticed that we're spiralling upwards?' asked Electron, interrupting the tiresome argument.

It was true; for some time the corridor had been curving gently and there was an upward slope to the floor. Electron had mentioned it as the slope became more pronounced. They had the feeling that they were about to reach some kind of destination.

Without warning, the tunnel ended and they emerged into what appeared to be a circular, man-made stone room, like something found in a mediaeval castle. A stone staircase ran around the circumference of the wall and disappeared through an opening in the ceiling above.

'Why do demons build stone castles?' asked Nightflyer. 'Or for that matter, long tunnels and lava pits? Aren't they supposed to be creatures of pure thought?'

'Maybe they don't build them. Maybe it's our expectations mapped onto this reality?' said Electron.

'Whoa.'

'Maybe that's why Haven looked like it did, too. I don't know, I'm just guessing.'

'Maybe we should stop guessing,' said Scorpio, who was beginning to develop a strong dislike of metaphysics. 'If this is all in our minds, I don't want to know what happens if we start disbelieving it.'

'Good point,' said Electron.

The ascended the stairs in single file, Nightflyer taking the lead.

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Avatar's thoughts were in confusion. He recalled being on Earth. Now he was ... home.

He didn't think of it as 'Hell', but that Human concept was known to him, and he would admit that it fitted. Demons inhabited a realm of pure thought. An entire universe of conscious energy. And by human measures, that energy was purely evil.

Avatar was a demon, or rather, the physical Earthly manifestation of a fragment of the demon universe, the fragment that thought of itself by the label Karouvicine. Due to an accident of summoning, Karouvicine had been left with free will in Earth's dimension. Remarkably, and inexplicably, he had used that free will to develop morals and a desire to protect humans.

Karouvicine was a minor demon, as such things were measured, being a mere fraction of the energy of the demon universe. An infinitesimal fraction of infinite power that had bled through to Earth's dimension. The bulk of the demon universe's energy was embodied in the major entity known as Karoona. By simple mathematics, then, Karoona had infinite energy. Karoona *was* this universe.

Karoona currently stood over Karouvicine, gloating at his captive.

Reality was malleable here. For reasons Karouvicine couldn't fathom, Karoona had manifested a part of his realm as a mediaeval castle. Karoona himself had taken the form of a clichéd demon from human mythology. He stood four metres tall, goat's horns on his head, bat wings sprouting from his back. Karouvicine assumed he had a pointed tail and cloven hooves, though he couldn't see from his current position.

His current position was lying prone on a stone slab. His arms and legs were bound to it by iron chains. On Earth, Avatar's strength would have shattered the manacles without an effort. But here, the manacles were as strong as Karoona willed them to be. After a token effort, Karouvicine hadn't even tried to break free.

Karoona reached down and with one clawed hand he grasped the amulet Avatar always wore around his neck. It was a five-pointed star set in a circle, suspended from a silver chain. It was also the object that a Human wizard had used to bind Karouvicine to the Earthly plane. As long as he wore it, Avatar would retain his free will on Earth.

Karoona tore the chain from Avatar's neck.

Mine.

Karoona didn't speak the word. He didn't need to: demons understood one another.

Stupid Karouvicine. You called it the amulet of Karoona, but you had no true understanding of it, no more than did the Humans who wore it. Millennia ago, as Humans measure time, I pushed a fraction of my power into Earth's universe. An infinitesimally small fraction.

A fraction of infinity is still infinite.

But Humans could not use it. Not then, not since then. They played with it, but they had no understanding of their toy.

Then you, Karouvicine. I allowed you to be pulled through. And to own this. And to travel back in time to a point where this amulet already existed.

Yes, you see the paradox, don't you?

We do not view time as Humans do. Which means we can use it to do impossible things.

Such as manifesting two objects of infinite power in one instant.

***My** infinite power. Squared. And on Earth.*

Now it only requires that I complete the ritual I began millennia ago—and four hundred years in the future.

Complete the ritual, and end the Earth.

In Karoona's free hand a long-bladed knife materialised. He moved the point to Karouvicine's bare chest, and began tracing an unbroken pattern. One long straight line, a point, a second line ... five lines in all, forming a five-pointed star.

As the point moved, silver flame followed it and Karouvicine's basalt-like skin parted. And Karouvicine screamed in pure agony.

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'I'm not sure how long I can keep this up,' Electron wheezed. His lungs were still burning from the noxious fumes of the tunnels, and they had now been climbing stairs for an impossibly long time. He was fitter than most men, but had to admit that he wasn't on the same level as the superbly-trained Scorpio, let alone at Nightflyer's super-human peak, and his legs were literally shaking with the prolonged exertion.

The other two paused to let Electron take a breather. He leaned gratefully against the wall, not daring to sit down in case he couldn't stand again.

'How are we getting back?' Nightflyer suddenly asked.

The three heroes looked at each other, aghast. They had been so wrapped up with the immediate goal of finding Avatar, they had thought no further ahead than that.

'Maybe the Sorcerer will summon us back,' said Scorpio.

'If he could do that, he could have just pulled Avatar out in the first place,' said Electron pessimistically.

From ahead of them, an unearthly scream came echoing down the seemingly endless staircase.

'What that ... Avatar?' said Electron.

'Does it matter?' asked Nightflyer, already accelerating up the stairs. Scorpio followed, leaving Electron to shrug and do his best to keep up.

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Nightflyer burst into the room at the top of the tower. He took in the scene in one unconscious glance: Avatar chained up, giant demonic thing standing over him with a knife. He didn't need any prompting for what to attack.

Using the full momentum of his flat-out run up the stairs, he hurled himself into the air, tucking into a somersault and uncoiling at the last instant so his feet connected with the side of the big demon's head with maximum force.

A crushing force smashed into the side of his own head, catapulting him across the room to smack into the stone wall, where he lay momentarily stunned. Only momentarily, as he rolled smoothly back to his feet and looked for the assailant. The chamber was still empty apart from him, Avatar, and the giant demon.

He leaped again and this time brought the edge of his right hand sharply down on the demon's wrist, in a move designed to make him drop the silver knife—which was as long as a sword to Nightflyer.

Another invisible blow struck him, this time on the right wrist. A chopping blow that felt like it had cracked the bones of his wrist. The demon still held the knife, so Nightflyer pivoted on one foot to deliver a spinning kick to the knife blade itself. This time, he felt a solid contact, and the knife went clattering to the floor. Nightflyer backed off and stood poised, waiting for another invisible attack. His intuition should tell him where the blows were coming from, allowing him to counter-attack whatever the invisible entity was.

The giant demon was beginning to react to Nightflyer's presence, ponderously turning its head to look at the tiny human threat. Nightflyer shuddered. He had seen depictions of similar-looking demons in the 20th century, but didn't have the cultural baggage to perceive the clichéd goat-headed look as inherently evil. But there was a malevolence in the demon's red eyes, a look of pure evil that he had never felt from any human villain. The eyes didn't glow in the way Avatar's did; they were a void, making Nightflyer feel as if he was sinking into a bottomless pit.

At that moment, Scorpio entered.

'Karoona, I presume?' he said, playing for time while he assessed the situation.

'Careful there's an invis—' Nightflyer's warning died in his throat as his intuition crystallised a picture of what had actually happened to him. Before he could shout a different warning, though, Scorpio struck.

Scorpio rarely used his internal energy generation power. So it was a measure of the magnitude of the evil aura Karoona emanated that for the second time today he felt the situation warranted his maximum energy output, a blast powerful enough to punch through a brick wall. From his raised right hand, a green bolt shot out and struck Karoona full in the chest.

Mysteriously, a green bolt of force struck Scorpio in the chest and knocked him clear across the room. Only his damage-resistant spider-silk armour kept his ribs intact.

'He's reflecting our attacks back at us,' Nightflyer yelled, too late.

'Marvellous,' groaned Scorpio, climbing to his feet.

Electron entered, and before either of his team-mates could speak he zapped the obvious threat in the room. Lightning crackled from his fingers, struck Karoona, and rebounded to hit Electron. Unlike his

companions, however, Electron was immune to his own power. He stood unfazed as electricity crackled around him. Unfortunately, Karoona appeared equally unfazed.

‘Oh, I get it,’ Electron said. ‘Do we have a plan?’

‘Grab Avatar and run?’ suggested Nightflyer.

‘Good plan. Keep the demon occupied,’ said Scorpio, running towards the stone tablet Avatar was chained to.

‘Me?’ Nightflyer looked around for a weapon, and his eyes lit on the knife lying on the floor. ‘Ok, I’m on it.’ So far the demon had not made an active attack at any of them, maybe trusting his defensive power to finish the fight, or maybe just toying with them. Either way, Nightflyer realised that the only way to survive this mission was by not giving a four-metre-tall demon of unknown power a free second in which to act.

He scooped the knife up and leaped at the demon again, raising the knife high in both hands. At the last instant, he realised how stupid the move was, and twisted aside before he would have driven the blade into the demon’s chest. Not before the demon flung up a protective arm, though.

Nightflyer landed behind Karoona and pivoted to face it again.

‘He’s afraid of the knife!’ he said. ‘But I can’t ... I mean ... it will ...’

‘Throw it here,’ said Electron.

Nightflyer tossed the knife to him. It stopped in mid air as Electron caught it telekinetically.

Electron braced himself in case his guess was wrong, realising that if it was he was probably about to kill himself, and concentrated on driving the point of the knife into Karoona with his full telekinetic strength.

He was right. By not physically holding the knife, he was not subject to the demon’s reflective shield. The knife penetrated deep into Karoona’s chest, leaving Electron unharmed.

Karoona bled pure silver, and threw his head back to howl in pain and rage.

Meanwhile, Scorpio had put the seconds they had won for him to good use. Grabbing one of the chains holding Avatar to the stone slab, he let a burst of his bio-energy shatter the links, freeing Avatar’s left hand. It hadn’t been as tough as he had expected, leaving him wondering why Avatar hadn’t already broken free through brute strength. Without wasting time running round the slab, he aimed precise shots at the other three chains from where he stood, completely freeing Avatar. Hooking an arm around Avatar’s shoulders to help him sit, he got his first good look at the state his friend was in. He had never seen the demon bleed on Earth, hadn’t even known if he could, but now he saw silver fire leaking from a pattern of cuts on Avatar’s chest and wondered what Karoona had done to him. He half-helped, half-dragged Avatar from the stone slab.

‘Kar ... he, he’s toying with you,’ mumbled Avatar. ‘Run.’

‘Love to,’ said Scorpio tersely. ‘Don’t know how to.’

‘My amulet ... bound to Earth.’

Avatar’s hand groped for something, and Scorpio realised it was his missing amulet. Belatedly, Scorpio realised that the silver cuts on Avatar’s chest mirrored the amulet’s shape.

‘It’s gone,’ he said. But you—’ He stopped, not sure how to explain things to Avatar.

‘Oh.’ Avatar seemed to understand, and some of the old fire returned to his eyes. Seeming to find new strength, he stood firmly and faced Karoona.

‘A miscalculation, Karoona. You have no power to hold me now. I am free-willed. I am bound to Earth. And I choose to return—’

‘Strikeforce! Leaving!’ shouted Scorpio. Electron was within arm’s reach and Scorpio stretched to grab his hand while wrapping his other arm more tightly around Avatar’s shoulders. Nightflyer came leaping across the room and stopped with his other hand grabbing Avatar’s arm.

‘—to Earth!’ finished Avatar.

Suddenly alone in the chamber, the giant form of Karoona stood silent. The dagger sticking in his chest vanished, along with all traces of the wound it had caused. Then the room itself melted out of existence, along with the physical form Karoona had adopted.

And Karoona laughed.

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With no sense of movement, they found themselves back in Astra's hospital room. Scorpio threw a glance at the wall clock and discovered, as he had half expected, that no time had actually passed. Astra and the Sorcerer were still there, in basically the same positions they were in when Scorpio last saw them.

Astra's jaw dropped. 'Avatar?'

The demon waved weakly at her. Scorpio's arm was still half supporting him.

'That was too easy,' said Scorpio.

'Easy? You call that easy?' exclaimed Electron.

'He let us go,' said Scorpio.

'Nah, we had him on the ropes,' said Nightflyer, massaging a wrist which he suspected might be broken. Nothing that his body shouldn't heal within an hour or two, though.

The astral body of the Sorcerer watched this banter with narrowed eyes, then spoke a single word.

'Karovicine.'

Only Astra recognised the power in the word. Though it was a form of magic she had no idea how to use, she could sense the binding command being directed at Avatar.

Avatar straightened, shrugging off Scorpio's arm, and faced the Sorcerer. The lines on his chest flared silver briefly.

'I will thank you for not using that name, *Sorcerer*,' he said. His voice echoed around the room in a manner that alarmed his team-mates. Even the Sorcerer recoiled, sudden uncertainty flickering across his features.

'I have internalised the amulet,' Avatar continued. 'You understand? No man can command me, not even you.'

'Ten percent of infinity,' whispered the Sorcerer. 'I understand, demon, better than you do. Have a care how you use it. Or better yet, do not use it at all.'

With that, the Sorcerer's astral form simply blinked out.

Astra let out a held breath. She hadn't fully understood what just happened, but some intuition told her she had witnessed the most significant event of her young life. Possibly of the Earth's life.

There was an uncomfortable silence as everybody in the room looked at Avatar, each privately wondering if his ordeal had changed him in ways other than the obviously physical.

Avatar seemed to slump slightly. The silver fire faded and died, leaving behind a tracery of silver lines on his basaltic chest.

Then he straightened and his familiar, wolfish grin appeared. 'So, who's buying the pizza?'

Not the end ...