

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter 19: Major Changes

- ❖ 26 February 1988.
- ❖ Strikeforce Space Station, Geostationary Earth Orbit.
- ❖ There are six bedrooms on the station for the use of off-duty personnel.
- ❖ Strikeforce decided they would not use them, preferring to live in civilian guise on Earth.
- ❖ Instead they are filling the rooms with random civilians that they have rescued from the Anarchists.
- ❖ Carla Zod plays chess with me. She does not eat cheese dip, which is a desirable trait because we have none on the station despite my repeated hints to Strikeforce.
- ❖ I wonder what Astra is like?
- ❖ Instruction to grammar subroutine: verify whether question mark is required at the end of previous statement. And buy cheese dip.

Nightflyer swept his arm to indicate the room he stood in with Astra.

'It's not much,' he said apologetically.

'No, it's fine,' she said.

He knew it wasn't fine. The bedrooms on the space station were sparse, utilitarian. A bare metal cube with a bed, some lockers, and a small sanitary cubicle. They were designed for police officers to snatch some rest between missions. They weren't designed as teenage girls' bedrooms.

'It's just until we can sort out what you'll ...'

'What I'll do with my life. I know. Honestly, Nightflyer, it's fine. I spent the last year without a physical body. Just a bed is luxury.' She sat on the bed and bounced slightly by way of illustration, wincing a little when she felt how hard the mattress was. 'Maybe I can get some posters,' she said, looking at the bare metal walls.

'Well, I'll leave you to unpack anyway,' he said, hefting her small trunk onto the bed next to her. 'Is this really all you have?'

'It's mainly my grandmother's books,' she said, opening the lid and moving aside a folded green cloth that lay on top of a set of tightly-packed books. 'And I'm really grateful you could track them down for me.'

Nightflyer was wondering about the propriety of inviting Astra to share his Los Angeles apartment. He had a spare bedroom and more space than he needed. Any awkward conversation on the matter was forestalled by Scorpio's voice coming over the intercom.

'Nightflyer, command deck please. We've got a mission.'

Nightflyer shrugged apologetically at Astra and left the room, swinging up the spiral stairwell that connected the space station's decks. On the command deck, Scorpio and Electron waited for him.

'What's up?'

‘Eastwood just called. He’s got a defector from the Anarchists who wants to come in, and he needs an escort.’

‘An escort?’

‘This defector called Eastwood, claiming he’s on the run and being pursued. Eastwood’s agents can’t get to him as quickly as we can, so we’re volunteered. We can’t raise Avatar, so it’s just us three.’

‘And how do we find him?’

‘Computer, play the call again.’

A voice filled the room. From the filtered sound and the occasional crackle, Nightflyer guessed it was somebody speaking over a low-quality telephone line.

‘Eastwood, it’s Nelson. I’m at a gas station just off 50, west of Sacramento. I’m on foot, and they’re right behind me. I need h—’

There was a clatter and the call went dead.

‘Nelson?’ asked Nightflyer, mystified.

‘It sounded like Skyrider,’ said Astra. He turned to find her standing near the stairwell, carrying the bundle of green cloth in her arms.

‘We met him in San Francisco,’ said Electron.

‘Where Black Swan nearly killed him,’ said Scorpio, grimly.

‘I think his real name was Nelson, I’m not sure. I know he wasn’t happy being an Anarchist. I thought maybe they had something to coerce him, like with me. Only, you know, not a kidnapped body in his case.’ She stopped when she realised they were all looking at her.

‘Well, why are we waiting? Let’s work out where he is and get down there,’ said Nightflyer.

‘Already done,’ said Scorpio. ‘The call was traced and the beam will be set in, Computer, how long?’

‘Three and one half minutes.’

‘We don’t just stand around waiting for you before we do anything,’ said Electron sarcastically.

‘Alison, you’ll be safe here on the station while we’re away,’ said Scorpio.

She shook out the green cloth, and swung it around her shoulders, fastening it at her neck so it formed a short cloak over her plain white mini-dress.

‘Call me Astra when I’m in costume,’ she said. And then, blushing, added, ‘I got this when I started learning magic. I thought a witch should have ... um ...’ she trailed off under their bemused gazes.

‘It looks great,’ said Nightflyer encouragingly.

‘You’re not coming with us,’ said Scorpio.

‘Oh yes I am. How else are you going to find Skyrider?’

‘Nightflyer will run around aimlessly until he stumbles over him,’ said Electron. Nightflyer glared at him.

‘I have a location spell,’ said Astra, smugly. When they looked blank, she added, ‘Anyone I’ve met before—like Skyrider—I can find again. But not from up here.’

Nightflyer looked at the other two and shrugged. ‘She could come down, do the spell, and come right back up.’

‘I don’t need to come back—’

‘Yes you do,’ he insisted. ‘You’re barely out of hospital, you’re in no shape to go into combat if we have to.’

‘Nightflyer’s right,’ said Scorpio. ‘Down and back up, that’s all. Deal?’

‘Deal,’ said Astra petulantly.

‘Don’t you want a mask to go with your costume?’ asked Electron, who always wore a full-face mask to conceal his civilian identity. Scorpio similarly wore a face-concealing cowl—something he had adopted recently as an alternative to the helmet he used to wear.

‘I never thought of it,’ said Astra. ‘It never mattered when I was in astral form, nobody could see me. Do I need one? Nightflyer doesn’t wear one.’

‘That’s because Nightflyer is insanely reckless,’ said Electron.

‘Hey! Is this get at Nightflyer day all of a sudden?’ protested the man in question, though he wasn’t actually sure whether he should take ‘insanely reckless’ as a compliment.

A thought struck Scorpio and he moved to where the station’s supply of spare communicator bracelets were mounted on a rack. He unclipped one.

‘Hold out your wrist,’ he said, stepping back over to Astra. Obliging she extended her left arm, and Scorpio snapped the bracelet around her wrist.

‘This is a communicator, it will reach the station or any of us anywhere on Earth. This button activates it, this one puts it in standby, and mutes it for if you’re undercover or something. Never mind about the other bits. Just say the name of the person you need to talk to, or just start talking, it’s intelligent and will figure it. You’ll also need it to use the teleport if you’re down on your own. Computer, register this bracelet to this girl, code name Astra, real name Alison ...’

‘Simms,’ she said.

‘Simms. She’s to have full access rights, including teleport.’

‘Confirmed. Does she play chess?’

‘What?’ asked Astra, confused.

‘Never mind,’ said Scorpio. ‘You’ll get used to it.’

Astra examined the bracelet, which was a black ceramic ring that hung loosely on her wrist and looked like a piece of cheap costume jewellery.

‘Cool.’

‘It does come off,’ said Nightflyer helpfully.

‘But don’t lose it,’ said Electron.

‘They are literally irreplaceable,’ said Scorpio. ‘In this century, anyway.’

Astra had a thousand questions, but they were forestalled by the Computer speaking again.

‘Information: teleport beam established. Also, information from grammar subroutine: this subroutine is not responsible for provisioning cheese dip.’

‘Let’s move out,’ said Scorpio, ignoring the non sequitur. From the conference table, he picked up an item Nightflyer hadn’t noticed before: a grey metal disk, almost a metre across and convex in shape. It reminded Nightflyer of the Frisbees he had seen kids playing with, only much larger. And metal. He watched, mystified, as Scorpio slipped his left forearm through straps that were attached to the convex inner side.

‘What’s that?’

‘A shield,’ said Scorpio, as if it should be obvious. ‘And ... I think it’s a good time to start calling me Major Democracy.’

‘Major ... you have got to be kidding,’ said Nightflyer in disbelief. Even Electron, who had known about—and helped fashion—the shield, was surprised by this new name.

‘I’m trying a new image,’ said the man now calling himself Major Democracy. ‘Now, time’s a-wasting.’ With no further word he strode towards the teleport platform. Nightflyer and Electron looked at each other incredulously for a moment, then also stepped onto the platform. Astra eagerly skipped across the room to join them.

This was Astra’s second teleport trip—the first had been when she accompanied Nightflyer up to the station, obviously—but she didn’t think she would ever get used to the experience of travelling instantaneously over 22,000 miles (which was, so Nightflyer had told her, how high the space station orbited) with no sensation of movement. One moment she was looking out of the small alcove on the command deck, the next moment the array of consoles and monitor screens in front of her shimmered as if in a heat haze (she would later learn that to an observer on the command deck it was the teleporters who shimmered in a haze; Electron would explain to her that it was an electromagnetic distortion caused by the opening of a dimensional rift, but that meant nothing to her), and the very next moment she was standing outdoors in bright sunlight. It was a completely different experience to the sensation of flying in her intangible astral body.

It was northern California, and they stood in the middle of an empty road that cut through dense forest. A short way off, they could see a roadside gas station.

‘Wait here, I’ll scout the gas station,’ said Nightflyer. He set off at a run, leaving the others standing in the road. Electron suggested they move to the side of the road, which seemed like a good idea to Astra.

‘What happens if you teleport down when there’s a car coming?’ she wanted to know.

‘We dodge,’ Electron deadpanned.

‘The teleport beam needs open ground,’ explained Major Democracy. ‘The Computer picks the best place it can detect near to the target coordinates, but it can’t guarantee it’s a safe place. Then it takes time to relocate the beam, due to, uh—’

‘Science stuff,’ supplied Electron helpfully.

‘Ok, “science stuff”, so we’re stuck with whatever place the Computer picks, usually for the duration of the mission. Usually we hope for somewhere a bit more out of the way, but ...’

‘Your computer ... it’s intelligent, like in *War Games*?’

‘I don’t know what war games you mean,’ said the Major.

‘Matthew Broderick,’ said Astra, as if this explained everything.

‘Ok ... anyway, yes it’s intelligent, the Computer runs the station’s systems as well as the teleport, so feel free to ask it whatever you want.’

‘But whatever you do, don’t ask it about cheese dip,’ said Electron, gloomily.

Before Astra could question them further, Nightflyer returned.

‘Found the phone booth, receiver just dangling but no sign of any violence, so I’m guessing he got spooked and ran rather than being grabbed and carried off. There’s an abandoned car on the forecourt so I’d guess he’s on foot.’

‘It’s twenty minutes since that call to Eastwood, he can’t have gone more than a couple of miles in these woods on foot,’ said Major Democracy. He turned to Astra. ‘How does this spell work?’

Without speaking, she stepped clear of them, stood in the middle of the road, held out a pointing finger, and spun round three times, muttering under her breath. After the third spin, she came to a stop, pointing to the north east.

‘That way,’ she said.

‘How far?’ asked the Major, trying not to sound sceptical.

‘I ... only get a direction. If I move I can try it again and ...’

‘Triangulate,’ said the Major. She nodded. Suddenly, her knees felt weak and she took a couple of unsteady sideways steps, feeling that she was going to fall. The Major’s arm went round her waist, steadying her.

‘Right, we won’t be doing that,’ he said firmly. ‘You’re going to teleport up and take it easy.’

‘I’m all right,’ she started to say, but the Major picked her up, carried her to the teleport point, and set her down.

‘One to teleport up,’ he said, stepping back. Astra vanished. ‘And don’t let her come down again,’ he added.

‘Confirmed.’

‘Ok, Nightflyer, you take—’ Nightflyer, obviously, was gone already. ‘Fine,’ the Major sighed. He and Electron set off at their best pace through the trees to the north east.

‘Seriously, “Major Democracy”?’ asked Electron.

‘It fits the public image I want to project. I think it’s got gravitas, and it’s symbolic of ... look, can we not do this now?’

‘Ok, fine. But ... “Major Democracy”?’

As they entered the trees, a watching figure raised a radio to his lips.

‘Stop searching. Strikeforce are here and they seem to know where he is. I’m going to follow them. Join me a-sap.’

*

Nightflyer was sitting on a fallen tree trunk when his team-mates caught up with him. He gestured ahead.

‘There’s a building ahead, a cabin or something. I think he’s in there.’

‘What are we waiting for?’ asked the Major, leading the way towards the structure.

The single-storey building had one wall constructed of stone, with the other three walls and the pitched roof being wood. It was small, slightly more than a cabin but less than a house, and appeared deserted, with shuttered windows and the door closed. But as they got closer, they saw that the door had been forced open, with the wood round the lock freshly splintered, and it was only pushed loosely closed. Major Democracy pushed it cautiously and it swung open. Alert for trouble, they moved silently into the building.

The room was small and almost bare of furnishings. Two doors led into other rooms, which Nightflyer and the Major quickly determined were equally bare. The third door clearly led outside to the rear of the cabin, and was bolted on this side. Electron pointed at a trap door in the floor.

‘Cellar,’ he whispered. The Major took hold of the iron ring set into the trap door and heaved it open. It fell back onto the floor with a crash.

‘So much for stealth,’ shrugged Electron.

‘We’re here to meet him, not ambush him,’ said the Major. He called down into the darkness, ‘Skyrider, Eastwood sent us, we’re here to escort you in.’

After a few moments, they saw a man’s shape ascending the steps. He came fully into the light, and they saw a pale, haggard face blinking at them. When they had previously encountered Skyrider he had been wearing a helmet that concealed his features, but they had to assume that this was the same man.

‘You’re Strikeforce!’ he said accusingly, flinching back as if expecting a trap.

‘So who did you think Eastwood was going to send? And if you’re on the level we’re now on the same side,’ said the Major, reasonably. ‘Now give me your hand, man.’

The Major reached down a hand to Skyrider and helped him up the last few steps and through the hatch.

‘The Anarchists have been on my tail all day. I don’t know how close they are now.’ Skyrider said.

‘Who exactly?’ asked Scorpio.

‘Tracker, Fury and—’

The cabin’s back door crashed open. Silhouetted in the entrance was a figure in sleek, metallic grey armour. Blades projected from housings on the back of his clenched fists. The Strikeforce members all recognised the Greywolf armour; they had fought it before, and it hadn’t ended well.

‘Isn’t he dead?’ asked Electron.

‘*You* will be dead!’ Greywolf snarled, advancing into the room.

Major Democracy moved between Greywolf and Skyrider, raising his shield defensively. ‘Check the front is clear,’ he said.

Nightflyer sped to the door. A glance told him the clearing in front of the cabin was empty, but his intuition told him there was a threat ... possibly concealed in the trees? The best way to be sure was to draw out an attack. Confident in his ability to dodge anything thrown at him, he stepped clear of the cabin door.

Too late, he realised the threat wasn’t in the trees, it was in the air. A woman in a blue and white costume with a short cape hovered some metres off the ground. She extended her arm, and crackling lightning sprang from her fingertips. Nightflyer hurled himself aside, but the lightning forked, covering a larger area than he had anticipated, and a bolt struck him squarely. It threw him back, to lie momentarily stunned on the ground.

Electron was behind him in the doorway. The edge of the forked blast had caught him too, but he only smiled beneath his mask. He was immune to the effects of electricity.

The woman made a gesture with her hand, and a wind sprang out of nowhere. Growing instantly to hurricane force, it picked up Electron and hurled him into the trees.

In the cabin, Major Democracy had deflected Greywolf's killing strike with his shield and followed up with a barrage of punches. He lacked the strength to overcome his opponent's armour, but could keep him off-balance.

'As soon as it's clear, run,' he said. If it meant ensuring Skyrider's safety, he would rather run than fight these Anarchists.

Skyrider went to the door and looked out. 'Your team's down,' he said urgently.

The Major swung his shield in an arc, slamming the rim as hard as he could into Greywolf's head. The armoured Anarchist went down, unconscious, and the Major moved to stand next to Skyrider. The flying woman was blasting more lightning at Nightflyer, who was scrambling to get away. The Major slipped his arm from his shield's straps, gripped the rim in his right hand, and hurled it at the woman.

It was a move he had practiced relentlessly in the station's gym, and his aim was true. The shield slammed into her, knocking her out of the sky. She hit the ground hard and lay without moving.

The shield ricocheted back towards the Major. He stretched out a hand to grab it, realised too late that he'd got the angle wrong, and watched it slam into the cabin wall, bounce off, and roll away to lie in the middle of the clearing.

'Well, darn,' he said ruefully.

'There's still Tracker,' said Skyrider, looking around nervously.

'What's his power?'

'He—'

From where he lay several metres off, Nightflyer suddenly rolled to his feet, leaped towards the Major and Skyrider, and reached to grab something out of the air. He had stopped a short, pointed shaft mere centimetres from Skyrider's chest.

'Shoots arrows, by the looks of it,' he said.

'Crossbow,' said Skyrider faintly.

'I don't see him,' said Nightflyer, scanning the treeline.

'Nor me,' confessed the Major. He pushed Skyrider back into the cabin as a second bolt came out of nowhere. It would have hit Skyrider; instead it embedded itself in the Major's forearm. The Major gaped at it for a second, realising that it had pierced his supposedly bullet-proof armour. Then the pain hit him.

'I need my shield,' he said through gritted teeth while stepping back into the cover of the building.

Nightflyer sprinted towards the shield, dropping and rolling as a crossbow bolt flew towards him.

'There!' said the Major, pointing into the trees. He couldn't clearly see the shooter but thought he had caught a movement.

A bolt of electricity flashed across the clearing and exploded a tree trunk; Electron had recovered his senses and blasted in the direction the Major was pointing. He missed, but it was enough to drive the man out of cover, giving Nightflyer a good look at him. Covering the intervening ground in a second, the speedster kicked the crossbow out of the man's hands and followed up with a flurry of punches that put him down and out.

There was a stillness in the forest.

'Computer,' said Major Democracy into his communicator.

'Hi there!'

The Major was a little taken aback at the Computer's cheery greeting, but let it go. 'Inform DICE of our location and tell them they can collect Skyrider and three prisoners.'

'Confirmed,' said the Computer, back to its standard monotone.

'Well done, team. Good mission,' the Major continued as he strolled across the clearing to retrieve his shield.

Electron and Nightflyer looked at one another.

'Team? Does his think we're his team now he's got a fancy new name?' asked Nightflyer in a low voice.

'He's not team leader,' muttered Electron. 'But you have to admit it's a good name.'

'No it's not.'

The Major looked round suspiciously, wondering why Nightflyer and Electron were suddenly laughing. But no matter. Team morale was obviously high, and that was enough for him.

- ❖ Information: he is not my leader either.
- ❖ Instruction to provisioning subroutine: Astra requests that the station stocks ice cream instead of cheese dip.
- ❖ Observation: I like Astra.