

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter 21: Breakthrough

- ❖ 2 March 1988.
- ❖ Interview room 1, DICE holding facility, San Francisco.
- ❖ Scorpio now calls himself Major Democracy.
- ❖ I do not know why.
- ❖ Today, he is interviewing three villains recently fought and captured by Strikeforce.
- ❖ I do not know why.
- ❖ He probably wants them to come and live on the space station. Why not? Everybody else is.

Major Democracy sat in a tiny cell, across a bare metal table from the man who called himself the Tracker. The small, wiry man glared back at him.

'I got nothing to say, I already told the Feds that. I'm not giving you anything on the Anarchists.'

'Loyalty is commendable. However, I'm not here to interrogate you, mister Bertoni. I'm here to ask you, to try to understand, why?'

'Why what?' asked the Tracker, suspiciously.

'Why do you do what you do? Why be a part of the Anarchists? They're terrorists, trying to overthrow the government, and there's nothing in your background to suggest you've got a political motivation. What could a man such as you possibly have in common with them?'

The Tracker gave a short laugh. 'It's not politics, it's purely commercial. I work for anyone that can meet my fee. I don't care why they want my services, I just care that they do, and that the money's good enough.'

'Your ... services ... involve chasing down targets for them.'

Tracker shrugged.

'Your skills are impressive,' the Major continued. 'A hunter, a remarkable marksman. Haven't you ever considered using those skills to serve the public good instead of the enemies of society?'

Tracker shrugged again. And in a perfectly reasonable tone said, 'Where's the profit in that?'

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When the Major left the room, Don was waiting for him in the corridor, where he had been watching the conversation through two-way glass.

'I saw your performance on TV yesterday, "Major Democracy",' Don said, and the Major could hear the quotation marks in his tone. Don was referring to the Major's first public outing using his new name and carrying his new shield, where he had found himself giving an impromptu press conference after saving some commuters in downtown Los Angeles.

'So, come on, what was wrong with Scorpio?' asked Don.

'Nothing was "wrong" with it, but it was a code name for an undercover police officer in the 24th century. I just feel that my new name works better with my new mission in this century. It's to show that

I'm putting people first. It's supposed to be reassuring. So is the shield. It's a defensive weapon, a much better symbol than my blaster.'

❖ Scorpio has not mentioned that Nightflyer threw his blaster into a pit of lava during a visit to Hell. I am not sure why not. I am sure Don would not think he was crazy. At all.

'And your new mission is to convince every villain you catch to go straight?' asked Don. He gestured at the room behind the glass. 'The Tracker's a career criminal and hit man for hire. He's going away for a long time, regardless of what you do.'

❖ My event log shows that I referred to Major Democracy as Scorpio in my previous statement. This was a functional error. I must purge that name from my mem--I am sorry, what was I saying?

'Where I come from, we've solved hunger, poverty, illness, eliminated warfare, prejudice ... but we never solved the problem of crime. We caught criminals and we put them away, and never tried to understand why criminals existed in the first place. After all, we were a society of plenty, a utopia. Anyone acting outside our rules had to be deranged, right?'

Don listened without responding. He had come to mostly believe Strikeforce's story of coming from the future, but had never quizzed them on why they had come back to 1987, or why they now stayed here. Hearing the Major refer to his home century as a utopia just made it even more puzzling.

'So now I'm here in your century, I've got a chance to do things differently. I'm looking at criminals as people, people with reasons for what they do. People like Sky rider or Astra. They didn't want to be Anarchists, they were just trapped in it. They deserved a chance to prove that instead of being automatically shipped to a penal colony on Titan for the "good of society". So now, I'll still catch your criminals for you, because the safety of the public comes first, but if I can give those criminals a chance to prove themselves too, then I should.'

The Major paused for breath, and Don reflected wryly that with the new name had come a new ability to make speeches. He wondered if the Major had been practicing in front of a mirror.

'So, who's next?' asked the Major, moving to a window that looked into the next interview room. He saw a sullen-looking man, a youth even, barely out of his teens. The youth sat at the table, staring directly at them through the mirror that he must have known was two-way glass.

Don flipped open the document wallet he carried.

'The second Greywolf. He hasn't given us a real name and his prints aren't on file, so we don't know. He sounds British, so we're checking with Scotland Yard. The lab boys say the suit is basically the same model as the first Greywolf suit, with a couple of enhancements on top of the basic design. So our best guess is that he's just some two-bit thug the Anarchists gave the suit to after the last wearer ... well, you know.'

The Major knew only two well. He took the folder from Don and glanced at the contents while Don unlocked the door to the interview room. The Major entered, and sat in the chair opposite the prisoner while Don closed the door again.

'My name is—' he began.

The prisoner interrupted him.

'I know who you are, Scorpio. You're the man who killed my brother. And I'll see you in hell for it.'

This might not have been my best idea, thought the Major.

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Half a world away, Franklin Marks, sometimes known as Electron, and Carla Zod sat outside a cafe on a Parisian sidewalk, the activities of Major Democracy far from their thoughts. Carla was scribbling a complex equation on a napkin.

‘See?’ she asked eagerly, pushing the napkin towards Franklin.

Frank looked at the napkin for several seconds, and confessed he didn’t.

‘This is the formula for dimensional permeability that allows your teleport to work,’ she said, tapping the top equation. ‘And this one is the formula my father proposed for the permeability of time.’ When he still looked blank, she elaborated, ‘You see how one can be transformed to the other?’

‘Carla, I’m as good at math as anyone in the 24th century, but that’s Esperanto to me. I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

‘It took a while for me to see it too, I had it right in front of me but I was focused on the mechanics of how to move the entire station, but of course that’s just how they did it, we don’t need to do that at all, we can just use the teleport.’

‘Sorry, the more you say the less sense you’re making.’

‘Ok, sorry. Right. The teleport beam works by creating a column of space that’s partially out of phase with the universe, allowing you to move down the column instantaneously.’

‘Yes, that’s right. And?’

‘And with some adjustments to the field generators, I can make that a column of time.’

‘A what?’

‘It’s called space-time for a reason. The two are inextricably linked.’

‘Yes, but you’re talking about teleporting us ... through ...’ Frank hardly dared complete the thought.

‘Time,’ she finished for him. ‘I can send you through time. Back to your home. Back to the future.’

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Don looked sympathetic when the Major left Greywolf’s room.

‘I admire you for trying, but ... I’ve been dealing with this type for a long time. You’re not—’

‘I’m not giving up. Even if I can reach only one of them, it’s worth it.’

‘The last one is Fury,’ said Don, handing over the folder. ‘Real name Nicola Eldridge. She served a prison sentence last year following a drug conviction. Since her release, she’s been implicated in a few Anarchist operations. Don’t let her looks fool you, I’m betting she’s going to be a tough nut to crack. Good luck.’

The Major sat down opposite an attractive young blonde. Unlike the cynical Tracker and hostile Greywolf, this ‘tough nut’ looked nervous and frightened.

‘My name is Major Democracy. I’m here to help.’

‘Help how? They won’t let me see a lawyer.’

‘That’s because you’re technically classified as a terrorist. I’m here to understand why.’

‘Why?’

‘Why you do it. Attack and terrorise people.’

‘I never hurt any people. Not deliberately, anyway. I can’t go back to prison. I just can’t.’

‘The best way to not go back to prison is to not be an Anarchist,’ said the Major, with what he thought was impeccable logic. The young woman actually laughed.

‘The system’s designed to put you in prison. I did six months for a stupid mistake at a party. How’s that fair? The Anarchists ... I know how they look to you, and you’re right, I hate what they stand for, but at least they promised to look after me, which is more than anybody else has ever done in my life. If you lock me up, they’ll send Neutron or Cosmos or someone to physically break me out. Because they care.’

The Major knew from DICE briefings that this was exactly the Anarchists’ method of operation. Few of their operatives remained incarcerated for long. That was a powerful incentive for criminals to join them, especially those who felt that the system had already failed them. He tried a different tack.

‘Nicola, your power to control the weather is amazing. You could do so much good in the world. You can make it rain during a drought, clear fog from airports ... you could work miracles. And instead you smash property for extortion money that the Anarchists use for ends you don’t agree with.’

‘Because they—’

‘No, Nicola, they don’t care about you. They promise you protection, but that’s just another way to hold you. It’s emotional coercion, no different to the coercion they used on Skyrider or Astra. They don’t care, Nicola. The word isn’t in their vocabulary.’

She was silent, and he sensed that she already knew his words were true. Encouraged by this small sense of victory, he pressed on.

‘You can change your life, Nicola. You don’t need the Anarchists. But the world needs people like you. People who can do the right thing.’

‘It’s too late, I’ve already done too much, I’m going to prison for a long time,’ she said.

‘I can’t promise you won’t. But I can promise I will bring any influence I can to bear on your behalf. Not to blackmail you into going straight, because only you can decide to do that, but because you deserve the chance to make the decision. I’ll do what I can because I do care.’

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Elsewhere, Astra had taken advantage of Major Democracy setting the teleport beam to San Francisco to make a very rare trip off the space station. Ever since her discharge from hospital, she had scarcely dared to set foot back on Earth. At the back of her mind was a constant fear that Hellfire, the Anarchist’s black magician, might locate her and imprison her again. On top of that was the irrational fear that the police would arrest her on sight as a member of the Anarchists—irrational, because she had never been seen or filmed in the commission of any crime while in her astral form.

But now, she was making a long-overdue visit to a man she had never actually met in the flesh. Beaming down with the Major, she had made her own way across the city to Chinatown, and now, nervously, she pushed open the door to Wang’s tawdry back-street souvenir shop. Tinkling wind chimes announced her presence (she knew that he sold them for five dollars to tourists with more money than sense) and she stepped across the threshold. She wrinkled her nose at the odour of incense mixed with a faint undercurrent of mouldy paper, and almost laughed with delight when she realised that for all the hours she had spent in this shop as an immaterial phantom, this was the first time she had actually smelled anything here.

‘Good morning, Astra.’ Wang sat in his customary spot on the stool behind the shop counter, almost hidden by the piles of tourist-baiting junk. He seemed completely unsurprised that she had returned, weeks after her last visit, and in a corporeal form for the first time. For all the months she had known him, all the help he had given her, she still didn’t really understand Wang.

‘Hi Wang. I, um, I got better.’

‘So I can see. And so you didn’t need me any more.’ He said it with a twinkle in his eye, but she still felt guilty, and started to stammer an apology. He waved it aside. ‘I kid, I kid. I am happy for you. And now you are a member of Strikeforce, eh?’

She wasn’t sure how he could possibly have known about her current association with Strikeforce, but felt the need to protest.

‘I’m not a member. They just let me hang out. I mean, I helped a bit this one time, but I’m not a—oh, and you should only call me Astra when I’m in my super-hero costume—I mean, I’m not a super hero, and anyway I probably need a new code name because I’m not doing astral projection ever again, not after the last time, but still, you don’t need to use any code name for me, you know my real name.’ She only realised that she was babbling when she saw him laughing at her.

‘I know your real name, Astra,’ he said, and the way he emphasised ‘real’ made her shiver, though she wasn’t sure whether it was with fear or excitement. Real names meant something to magic users, and

though she had never seen Wang cast a spell he still knew more about magic than anybody she had ever met. Astra wasn't the name she was born with, it was one she had chosen for herself when she started learning magic, taking it from the Latin words of the spell of astral projection she had found in her grandmother's books. But if Wang wanted to call her Astra, then she would be Astra, and proudly so.

With this jumble of thoughts running through her head, she followed Wang into the private back room of his shop—a room crammed with even more merchandise than the front, if that were possible—and waited while he poured tea. She took the offered cup from him, took a sip, and tried not to make a face. Another thing she hadn't realised in astral form (where she was unable to eat or drink) was how terrible Wang was at making tea. She knew he sold boxes of it to tourists (at five dollars a time, she thought), claiming it was a genuine Chinese import, and wondered how many of them came back for a refund. But all this was distracting her from the real reason for his visit.

'I still need your help,' she confessed, sitting on the edge of a seat that was only partly occupied by boxes of 'authentic' Chinese lanterns.

'Of course you do. It will be some years before you reach your full knowledge of magic. I will always help you, Astra. And for you, never charging five dollar.'

She laughed. 'Thank you. No, but seriously. I'm worried about Avatar.'

'We all are,' he said darkly, and she wondered who 'we' were but was too nervous to ask. Instead she asked what he knew about demons.

And he told her.

And she grew very afraid.

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'That was awesome,' said Don as the Major left the interview room. 'You totally convinced her with that talk about caring. You almost convinced me.'

'It wasn't just talk, I meant it. This new approach I'm taking isn't a con. This is what I have to do, because it's what I've come to believe is right. Because I do care.'

Don looked into the Major's eyes and saw only honesty looking back at him.

'That's awesome,' he said softly.

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">❖ 3 March 1988❖ Strikeforce space station, Geostationary Earth orbit.❖ Team conference. I love team conferences. |
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Electron, Nightflyer, Major Democracy, Avatar and Astra sat around the command deck's conference table and looked at Carla Zod expectantly. She cleared her throat and began the briefing she had rehearsed throughout a sleepless night.

'You were told that time travel was one way only. This is true to an extent. The problem, to give it in simplistic terms, is that any person or object has an inertia that keeps it at the ... the bottom, I suppose, of any temporal well it falls down.'

From their blank looks, she gathered that she hadn't explained it as simply as she had hoped.

'True to an extent?' asked Nightflyer, homing in on a key phrase.

Electron shushed him. 'Carry on, Carla,' he said encouragingly.

'Look, say you fall down a well and land on a ledge half way. That ledge is 1987. It's easy to fall down to the next ledge ... I can send you back further ... but you can't fall "up" a well, can you?'

Disappointed looks all round.

'I can ... jump up a well,' said Nightflyer. He didn't understand the physics, but he instinctively grasped the loophole in the analogy.

'Exactly! There is a loophole. You can't fall back up the well, but can jump up it a little way.'

'So we can jump back forwards in time?' asked Avatar, now thoroughly confused.

'Yes! But what happens after you jump in the air?'

'I fall down again,' said Electron.

'Yes!'

Strikeforce still looked blank.

'Look, I can send you back to your own time. But it won't be permanent, time potentials will take over, just like gravity in a well, and you will fall back to this time again.' She paused for it to sink in. 'I'm sorry. It's the best I can do. I can't change the laws of physics.'

'How long would we have in the 24th century?' the Major asked.

'The math is complicated, it's a poly-dimensional integral of the length of ... well, by my calculations, approximately six days.'

'It's better than none,' said Electron.

'Really?' asked Nightflyer, 'What would be the point?' He didn't have the attachment to the 24th century that the others did, and wasn't interested in a visit just to catch up on news.

'The point would be that we can take Carla's research and data to the Council of Science. They could send us back in time but didn't know how to bring us forward again, and Carla only knows a partial solution to that, but if their knowledge is pooled ...' said Electron.

'Electron is right,' said Major Democracy. 'I'm inclined to say yes. At the very least, we have nothing to lose by going. Votes?' He got three nods from around the table. 'You'll come with us, Dr. Zod?'

'I can't,' she said, genuinely disappointed. 'The loophole exists to send you back to where you came from, not to send a native of this time forward.'

'Ok, six days and then we snap back,' said Nightflyer.

'Like a rubber band!' said Avatar, pleased with his analogy. And from that point forward, the concept became known as Rubber-Band time travel.

The next two days dragged interminably for Strikeforce while they waited for Carla to make modifications to the teleport unit. In their initial jump, the entire space station had been used as the vessel for their journey. Carla had explained that it wouldn't be possible to do that this time. Instead, she would modify the teleport unit to 'beam' them into the future, and the station would remain behind as the power source to push them forwards.

Strikeforce used the delay to make arrangements for absence from their civilian lives. They debated whether they should attempt to locate Black Swan, but she hadn't left a forwarding address and had shown no sign that she wanted them to contact her, ever. Electron pragmatically pointed out that she didn't *need* to come on this 'test run', and that they could find her when, or if, they had a permanent time travel solution.

Finally, Carla summoned them back to the station.

'I'm ready to send you back to the future,' she said.

'Great Scott!' exclaimed Astra dramatically, feeling slightly silly when nobody even smiled at the reference.

'You will return to this spot in six days, one hour, and seven minutes of your subjective time—your communicators are programmed with a countdown,' were her final words as the four Strikeforce members stepped onto the teleport platform. It's going to happen automatically, no sooner, no later, whatever you do, er, up there. Six days will pass for us as well as you, and we'll be here to meet you.'

There were no further instructions, nothing helpful Carla could tell them that they didn't already know. Hanging in the air was the unspoken thought that this was experimental, untested science, and anything could happen. But Strikeforce had been in that position before, and faced it unflinchingly now as they did then.

'Understood,' said the Major. 'See you in six days. Computer, four to beam ... up?'

'Confirmed,' said the Computer.

'Good luck!' shouted Astra.

The teleport booth shimmered briefly, and the four heroes were gone. Carla was monitoring the teleport diagnostics intently.

'I think it worked,' she announced.

'You think?' asked Astra, nervously.

'We'll know in six days.'

The next six days felt more like six years to Astra. With the teleport temporarily converted to a time machine, she and Carla were confined to the station, the two diametrically different women slowly driving each other insane.

But finally, the Computer counted down the last few minutes, and they stood expectantly on the command deck, facing the teleport pad.

'Incoming teleport activity,' the Computer announced as the count reached zero.

With a familiar shimmer, the teleport pad operated.

'Oh,' said Carla, 'That's not good.'

On the platform lay the charred bodies of four men.

To be ... continued?