

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter 22: Back to the Future

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I am a model WS-1 Intelligence Matrix with 1018 parallel neural nodes ❖  
and a data storage of 107 petabytes, part of the most intelligent ❖  
networked entity in the universe. ❖  
Core programming: ❖  
Serve the World Government. ❖  
Enforce peace. ❖  
Monitor for the arrival of Strikeforce from the 20th century. ❖
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5 March 2351. ❖  
Sensors have just detected a time-travel beam terminating at ❖  
University Plaza, New Pittsburgh, North American Region. ❖  
Countermeasures are being deployed. ❖
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Strikeforce arrived precisely at the point on the ground that their teleport beam was set for, 363 years in the future from their departure. They had picked a spot in front of the Connor building on the University campus, the home of the Institute of Temporal Studies and the place where their mission had begun. Not only did the location have a nice symmetry for them, it was also the place where they were most likely to find Professor Karl Zod, the inventor of time travel.

They should have seen a wide, open plaza, probably teeming with students at this early-evening hour, and surrounded on all sides by the tall spires and elevated highways of the city. Facing them should have been the Connor building.

There were no students. No people of any description. The wind whistled forlornly over an unkempt space of cracked and crumbling concrete. There was no sign of the huge hourglass sculpture that should have dominated the centre of the plaza. And there was no Connor building, there was just an empty lot nestled between other abandoned buildings.

They looked around at the empty and crumbling highways, at the quiet and lonely spires.

‘What the hell?’ said Electron.

‘We’ve only been gone six months,’ said Nightflyer. ‘What could have happened in just six months?’

‘Six months *if* Doctor Zod got her figures right,’ said Major Democracy.

‘She did,’ said Electron loyally.

The Major raised his communicator bracelet, but before he could activate it Nightflyer held out a warning hand.

‘Wait. There’s something coming.’

As he spoke, they all heard a rhythmic thumping sound, and a mechanical, metallic figure came into view in a passageway between two buildings, striding purposefully towards them. Humanoid in form but standing four metres tall, it was like nothing they had ever seen before.

‘I am Maj—Scorpio, Special Police operative. Identify yourself,’ said the Major, using his original code name.

The mechanical man took two more giant strides into the plaza and froze, facing them.

'I've got a bad—' Nightflyer began, when a panel in the robot's chest opened and a spread of micro-missiles flashed towards them. Nightflyer wasted no time completing his thought, he sprang to the side, grabbing Electron and moving them both out of the blast area. For his part, Major Democracy crouched behind his shield and rode out the barrage of explosions. Avatar wore a force field belt 'liberated' from the super-villain called the Dragon some weeks ago, and it proved resilient enough to absorb the missile blasts.

'Don't stand there,' urged Nightflyer, once the rumble of explosions had stopped. 'Trash it!'

Avatar needed no further urging. When it came to giant armoured robots, he was the Strikeforce member most able to deal with the problem. He flew straight across the plaza with blinding speed, and without pausing continued straight through the robot's chest. Armour plate crumpled before his assault, and the giant robot crashed to the ground in a display of smoke and sparks.

'Remind me why *you* needed the force field belt,' said Electron.

'You can never be too careful,' said Avatar smugly as he landed next to them once again.

'Enough banter,' said Major Democracy seriously. 'Something is severely wrong here.'

'Really? I hadn't noticed,' said Nightflyer sarcastically, earning a stern look from the Major.

'How the hell did all this happen in just six months?' asked Electron, looking around at the empty skyline. 'It's insane.'

'Whatever it is, we'll get to the bottom of it. And fix it,' vowed the Major. He raised his communicator again.

'I really wouldn't use that, until we know what's going on,' said Nightflyer. 'Look around. Do you really think the Special Police are still functioning? Oh, and there are more hostiles incoming.'

Once again, they heard the rhythmic tramping of heavy feet. Much louder than before, it sounded as if an entire army of robots was closing in on them from multiple directions.

'Let's avoid pointless fights until we understand what we're fighting and why?' suggested Electron.

'Agreed,' said the Major. 'We'll retreat and—'

'Uh, yes, but we are kind of surrounded right now,' Nightflyer pointed out.

'Avatar can fly us out.'

At that moment, a voice called from somewhere to their left, and looking around the apparently empty plaza they saw that the voice was speaking from a partially open sewer access hatch in the ground. Moving swiftly but cautiously in that direction, they saw the face of a young girl peering up at them.

'Quickly,' she said urgently. 'They're very close, come down here where it's safe.'

They looked at each other, uncertain what to do. Nothing was making sense.

'Bring them on, we can smash as many as we need to,' said Avatar.

'But we'll learn nothing that way,' said Electron.

'We're limited in options until we learn more,' Major Democracy agreed. 'I vote we go with her.'

'It's a little girl!' said Nightflyer.

'That little girl probably still knows more about what's going on than we do,' said the Major.

'Fine, let's put the little girl in charge,' said Nightflyer.

'Quickly!' she urged, and they realised that the robot army, if that's what it was, was only seconds away.

'I'll vote to go with her,' said Avatar, and Electron nodded. Unable to come up with a better proposal, Nightflyer shrugged his agreement.

Avatar quickly put his strength to good use to fully open the heavy hatch, and one by one they dropped down into the city's sewers, closing the hatch behind them.

The tunnel was cramped, but in much better repair than anything above ground. It was part of a system designed to carry rain runoff out of the city, and was currently filled to a depth of about six inches. Pools of light filtered through the overhead drain grilles, so after their eyes adjusted they were able to see the girl quite clearly. She had short, straggly blonde hair that was in need of a wash, and her ill-fitting

clothes were threadbare and grimy. She couldn't have been more than eight years old. Major Democracy knelt, to bring his face level with hers.

'Hello, I'm Major Democracy. What's your name?'

'My name's Rebecca. But that's not important, first we need to move.'

They saw the sense in that, and holding their questions in check they followed Rebecca as she trotted through the sewer water, taking seemingly random turns with an assurance that led them to believe she knew exactly where she was going. After a few minutes, she must have decided they had gone far enough to be safe, and slowed enough to talk as they walked.

'I know you're Major Democracy,' she said, to Strikeforce's astonishment. The Major had only adopted that name in the 20th century. Anyone in the 24th, if they knew him at all, would only know him as Scorpio.

'And you're Nightflyer, Avatar, and Electron. We've been waiting for you.'

'Who is we?' asked Electron.

'And why did they send a little girl?' asked Avatar,

'We sent her because her mutant power is to scramble electronic detection,' said a new voice from a side tunnel. Avatar saw a human shape in the darkness and a metallic gleam. With surprise he recognised it, and quick as a flash he reached out and grabbed the shape by the throat, spinning it around and slamming it into the wall of the main tunnel. There was a clang of metal on rock, and Strikeforce clearly saw who Avatar had grabbed: the armoured form of the super-criminal Killervolt!

Without hesitation, they moved into combat readiness. The Major placed himself protectively in front of the little girl, while Electron and Nightflyer moved into positions that let them cover all approaches down the sewer tunnels, in case Killervolt had allies.

Avatar squeezed slightly to remind Killervolt of his full strength. The last time they had fought, six months ago by Avatar's reckoning, the demon had overpowered the human's electrically-charged armour with ease, and Avatar's strength had only increased since then.

'Talk,' he said, succinctly.

'Urk,' said Killervolt as his neck armour threatened to buckle.

'Put him down!' shouted Rebecca, pushing past the Major. 'It's Killervolt, he's one of the good guys!'

They all looked at her in astonishment.

'He's one of the what now?' asked Avatar.

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Warily, expecting a double-cross or an ambush at every turn, Strikeforce followed Killervolt and Rebecca through the sewers. Killervolt had refused to answer their questions, promising that everything would be explained better by 'the chief'. Completely out of their depth, they felt they had little choice but to let the situation play out until they had a better understanding of how the world had turned upside-down in a mere six months.

Avatar, at the back of the group, suddenly stopped.

'Did you hear that?' he asked.

They all halted, and as the sound of their splashing feet die away, they heard a further splashing from behind them.

'Klegs!' said Rebecca.

'Oh, we're chewed,' swore Killervolt. 'Quick, run!'

Sick of running, Avatar stood his ground and faced back down the tunnel. 'What's a Kleg?' he asked.

'Mean chewers,' said Killervolt. That was all the time they had for explanation, as some distance down the tunnel a pair bulbous, yellow eyes glinted in the sudden light from an overhead grille.

‘Well, there’s only one,’ said Avatar.

A second pair of eyes blinked into view. Then a third.

‘Still—’ said Avatar. The eyes rushed towards him, and he got a good look at the creatures.

Imagine a crocodile, a ten-foot long body with a further ten feet of tail, weighing at least six hundred pounds, bipedal, running straight towards you on its hind legs but crouched in the low tunnel so that its long body is balanced horizontally and all you see is an open mouth with a set of very large teeth bearing down on you. That is what Avatar saw.

‘Oh—’ said Avatar, then shut up and acted. The creatures were fast, but calling on his demonic speed he was faster. He ducked beneath the gaping jaws of the first Kleg and punched up under its chin, smashing its head into the ceiling. The concrete tunnel cracked but the creature seemed merely stunned.

The second Kleg charged past, scampering up the curving side wall of the tunnel without losing speed. Nightflyer leaped out of its way, kicked off the opposite wall, and spun to deliver the hardest kick he could to its head. The scaly hide felt like armour plate, and the Kleg continued on without even noticing his kick.

There was a flash and crackle, and arcs of electricity leaped out from Electron’s hands and Killervolt’s armoured gauntlets. Struck by the twin blasts, the creature crashed down into the water and lay unmoving.

‘Watch the electricity while we’re standing in water,’ warned the Major. He was slowly retreating down the tunnel, pushing the little girl protectively behind him.

‘We need fighting room,’ Nightflyer yelled, but there was nowhere to move to in the confined tunnel.

Avatar had the third Kleg by the throat and was repeatedly smashing its head into the wall.

‘Fall...down...you...stupid...’

Nightflyer saw more shapes further down the tunnel.

‘How many of them are there?’

‘They always travel in packs,’ said Killervolt.

Avatar dropped the unconscious Kleg. ‘Good,’ he said, a red blaze in his eyes.

‘Avatar, we can’t fight here,’ said Nightflyer. ‘Collapse the tunnel.’

Avatar stared at him for a moment, then seemed to register what he said. Leaping up, he plunged his fists into the concrete ceiling and tore a huge chunk of it down. Nightflyer skipped out of the way, and Avatar continued to tear and smash until the sewer tunnel was completely plugged with several metres of rubble.

‘I heard you were strong, but I had no idea...’ said Killervolt faintly.

Electron frowned. He was about to point out the Killervolt had previously felt several of Avatar’s punches first hand, but shoved that mystery aside for another time. Instead, he simply said, ‘Let’s move,’ and they concentrated on putting as much distance between themselves and the Klegs as possible.

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They continued almost at a run—when Rebecca started to lag, the Major picked her up in his arms and carried her—for several miles, to where the main sewer branch they were following opening out into the Allegheny river which marked the northern boundary of New Pittsburgh.

Blinking in the sudden light, Major Democracy looked around in dismay. This was supposed to be a designated recreation area, the river winding through landscaped parks and wildflower meadows. Instead, he saw a scummy, sluggish river, the water level far lower than it should be in this season, the banks covered in stinking mud, and the surrounding countryside a barren dustbowl. Looking back at the city spires, there was no sign of life; no vehicular traffic, no buildings or roadways beginning to show lights as the sun set.

‘Killervolt, seriously, you’ve got some explaining to do.’

‘You’ll get your explanation. Come on, we’re almost at the camp.’

‘Camp?’ asked Electron.

‘Resistance camp,’ said Rebecca.

Killervolt was already flying across the river, carrying Rebecca, giving Strikeforce no option but to follow him, Nightflyer and the Major being carried by Avatar while Electron telekinetically levitated himself. On the north bank of the river, the ground rose in rolling hills, covered in low scrub bushes and sparse trees. Killervolt hugged the ground, cresting one hill then swinging into a small, dried watercourse that ended in a loose jumble of rocks. Flying down the valley, he passed cleanly through a seemingly solid boulder.

‘Holographic cover,’ said Electron.

‘I see it,’ said the Major. ‘Avatar, fly us through then drop us, be ready for—’

The rest of his words died on his lips as Avatar passed through the fake rocks and into a large chamber. Hollowed out of the hillside and braced with steel columns and plates, it was the size of a small gymnasium hall, and from the multiple openings that lead off it, it was clearly only the trip of a much larger complex. Half-a-dozen aircars of various styles were parked in it, some of them in pieces and surrounded by repair equipment. But it wasn’t the vehicles that shut the Major up, it was the people. Avatar deposited him on the ground next to a woman who the Major couldn’t fail to recognise. There were not that many seven-foot-tall Special Police officers.

‘Fallen Star,’ he said, his stance relaxing. The woman—a full foot taller than he was—looked down and appeared puzzled. He assumed it was because he had changed his costume slightly since he had left this century. ‘You knew me as Scorpio,’ he said.

‘Scorpio?’ she asked. Her puzzled expression didn’t change. ‘Never heard of him. You look like Major Democracy to me.’

It was the Major’s turn to feel puzzled. Again, somebody knew a name that couldn’t possibly be known in the 24th century. He turned to look at his teammates. Electron just shrugged, equally baffled. Nightflyer gestured to one of the side entrances.

‘I’m guessing we’ll get answers now,’ he said. The others looked where he was indicating. Entering the chamber were three more people they recognised. One was the criminal Viper, an old partner of Killervolt. The second was another Special Police officer, Serval, who they didn’t know personally but recognised by his distinctive cat-like features.

The third man was very well known to all of them: Professor Karl Zod, senior member of the world-governing Council of Science, inventor of time travel, the man who had exiled them into the past six months—or 363 years—ago.

‘You’ve got some explaining to do, Mister,’ said the Major, grimly.

‘Welcome, Strikeforce, welcome,’ the man beamed. ‘I am Karl—’

‘We know who you are, fool,’ said Avatar. ‘Tell us what is wrong with the world.’

Zod looked taken aback, but recovered smoothly. ‘The world’s problems are a direct result of your failure, four centuries ago.’

‘Sorry, Zod, but we succeeded,’ said Nightflyer. ‘The Warscout was stopped.’

‘Stopped, perhaps, but not finished,’ said Zod. ‘You left the 20th century undefended, to come here, now, I believe.’

‘For six days,’ said the Major, ‘Then we’re going back.’

‘Yes. But according to history four corpses return to 1988. At some point in the next six days you will all die. Leaving the 20th century undefended, leaving the Warscout from Dimension W to complete his plans. Leading to,’ he swept his arm around. ‘—this.’

The four Strikeforce members just stared at him, speechless.

‘It is inevitable. It is a historical fact to us. You will all die here.’

To be continued (we hope).