

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter 23: Somewhen Else

5 March 2351. ❖
Six days before Strikeforce die. ❖
Strikeforce have travelled forwards in time from 1988 to this year. ❖
They have not found things as they expected. ❖

‘You have to understand, you have never existed in this century.’

The man they had thought they knew as Professor Karl Zod was addressing the four members of Strikeforce. He looked like the Karl Zod they remembered, a dynamic, grey-haired man of around 50 years of age, but nothing he was saying to them was making any sense.

They sat in a small room in the underground complex where Zod and his fellow resistance fighters made their home. With them were several other men and women who Strikeforce thought they knew—fellow members of the Special Police organisation, as well as criminals they had fought—but who claimed to have no memory of not just Strikeforce but any kind of Special Police at all.

Electron raised his face mask to drain a cup of synthetic coffee, grimacing as he realised he had come to prefer the real thing from the 1980s. ‘We left on a mission through time six months ago,’ he explained patiently for the third time. ‘You sent us, Professor.’

‘I never did, in fact I have never researched time travel. Even if I had wanted to, all such research has been banned by the World Government.’

‘But—’

‘Just shut up, Electron, and let him explain from the start,’ said Nightflyer.

‘Start with how you know of us, of Strikeforce,’ said Major Democracy. ‘You had your people waiting for us, so you knew we were coming through time, and when and where it would be.’

‘It started when Fennec,’ Zod nodded at a small Middle-Eastern man in combat fatigues, ‘Discovered an old data cartridge hiding in an obscure storage vault. It was addressed to me personally, and seemed to be centuries old. It seemed to date from the 20th century, but the technology is clearly not of that time.’

Fennec produced a small ceramic wafer from a pocket of his fatigues.

‘It could be one of ours, from the station,’ said Electron.

‘It is,’ said Zod. ‘The contents make that plain. It was recorded by a woman called Carla Zod, possibly an ancestor of mine, who apparently knew you personally.’

‘She did,’ said Electron quietly. ‘She sent us here.’

‘I know. She recorded exactly what had happened. You went back from the 24th to the 20th century, to stop an attack by an extradimensional entity called the Warscout. Stranded in the past, you enlisted Carla Zod to send you back to the future. She recorded precisely when and where she was sending you, which is how we knew to intercept you. She also recorded that after six days had elapsed, you snapped back to the past, as planned, but arrived as four corpses. Somehow, you died—you will die—during the six days you spent—will spend—here.’ Zod held his hand up to silence their questions. ‘The recording included some details of what, let’s say, “your” 24th century was like, and, as you see, it is nothing like ours. I believe that the fact of you dying here prevented your ultimate victory over the

Warscout, and actually changed the course of history—your history—to produce an entirely different timeline. In this timeline, you four have never existed, the Special Police was never founded, I studied physics in my youth but never invented time travel as I evidently did in that other reality. And an extra-dimensional incursion, four centuries in the planning, decimated the world's population some 27 years ago.'

'Twenty-seven ... that matches up with the next cosmic string alignment,' said Electron.

'He waited nearly four hundred years!' said Nightflyer in disbelief.

'A computer consciousness ... why not? He's functionally immortal, I guess,' said Electron.

'All right, wait, stop and think about this,' said the Major. 'I don't know about the physics, but common sense tells us there's a problem here. We die in this future, therefore causing this future to exist. But how could we die in it before we caused it to exist, which we couldn't until we'd died, and ...' He ground to a halt, realising he was about to talk in circles.

'That's why they call it a paradox,' said Electron.

'Forget the whys and wherefores, let's concentrate on what we need to do,' said Nightflyer, focusing on the practical as usual.

'Number one, stay alive,' said Electron.

'Number two, beat the Warscout,' said the Major. 'I mean, here and now. Let's finish what we will evidently fail to do in the 20th, and stop him once and for all.'

'Yes,' said Avatar.

'Agreed,' said Electron and Nightflyer simultaneously.

Zod looked troubled, but said nothing.

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6 March 2351. ❖

Five days before Strikeforce die. ❖

The Major was awake at 0600 the following morning. He sat on the edge of the bunk that had been assigned to him and began pulling on his boots. In the dim light, he became aware that Nightflyer was watching him.

'You're awake early too, Nightflyer?'

'I don't need much sleep. So I've been thinking. Zod and his cronies aren't going to let us go out there and confront the Warscout. They've got it into their heads that we need to survive the next six days, so we will go back in time and undo the paradox, cause this future to never have existed.'

'They don't understand how time travel works,' said Electron from across the room.

'And we do?' countered the Major.

'None of us do,' said Nightflyer. 'Even the original Zod, even Carla, they might have worked out the physics but we're in completely untested water here. We might never be able to put the timeline right. We might make it worse. We just can't tell.'

'So what does your intuition tell you?' asked the Major.

Nightflyer thought for a long moment. 'It's not telling me anything. But I'm not going to sit here for six days under house arrest when I could be out there acting. If we beat the Warscout here and now, it doesn't matter if we die or not, we've given these people a chance to rebuild their world.'

It was the answer the Major expected, and hoped for. He stood up, pulled his uniform's cowl over his face, and picked up his shield.

'I agree. We help the people we can see here and now, not the theoretical people who might or might not exist in some other world. Electron?'

'You need to ask?'

'Good. So where do we start?'

‘First thing,’ said Electron, ‘Is data. These people know nothing. Their computers are isolated from the World Net—with good reason, the Warscout would be all over them in a second—and they’re hiding out here cut off from any kind of big picture. We need to interrogate a government terminal and find out what’s really going on in this world. Without that, we’re working in the dark. And despite what Nightflyer usually thinks, we can’t operate on guesswork.’

‘It means going into the city,’ said the Major. ‘And it won’t look like the city we’re used to. We’ll need a guide.’

‘I’ve got one,’ said Avatar from the doorway. Standing next to him was the tall resistance fighter they called Fallen Star.

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They moved swiftly in the early morning light, Fallen Star leading them unerringly across the barren hills towards the river that marked the northern boundary of New Pittsburgh. As they travelled, she talked about life in the world they had found themselves in.

She had been born Benjy Chenoby, twenty years ago in a work camp in the Siberian region, into a world already controlled by the extra-dimensional invaders. Humans toiled in mines and factories in appalling conditions, watched over by unrelenting robot overseers.

‘Why didn’t they just use robots as labourers?’ Electron wanted to know.

‘Why should they, when human lives are plentiful and cheap?’ came the response.

The radioactive deep mines took a toll on human workers, but once in a while they threw up an anomaly, such as Fallen Star. Born with mutated genes, she grew taller and stronger than any of her fellow workers. And faster. Faster by an order of magnitude. She used her physical abilities to help her fellow humans wherever she could, becoming something of a legend among them—and a target for the overseers.

Major Democracy mused on the parallels between this timeline and his own. He had known a Benjy Chenoby, from the Siberian region, whose irradiated genes had granted her strength and speed. She had joined the Special Police and taken the code name Fallen Star. Different environments had produced the same brave and selfless woman.

He wondered how this timeline’s James Lang had turned out, and where he was now.

When Fallen Star had grown too fast and too strong to control, she was marked for termination. She fled the work camp, joining up with the organised resistance, and eventually making her way to Zod’s group in the North American region. By that time, the story of Strikeforce had been discovered and was spreading through the human population, and Zod’s group had become the focal point for the majority of Earth’s remaining super-humans, all inspired by the impending arrival of the time travellers.

Many of them were disappointed by Zod’s pragmatic approach to that arrival. Instead of using it as a rallying cry for the overthrow of the invaders, his plan was to ... do nothing. Hide Strikeforce, keep them safe. That was the full extent of his plan.

As far as Fallen Star and many of her comrades were concerned, that wasn’t a plan. That was Zod sticking his head in the sand.

‘I’m generally not at all impressed with Zod’s plans in any timeline,’ said Avatar, voicing what all of Strikeforce felt.

By now they had reached the river, and before Avatar flew them across Fallen Star quickly described the new plan.

‘We’re heading for a police station—it’s probably not what you’re thinking of, it’s a central processing centre for patrol robots. But it will have hard data ports, which will take these.’

She produced four small data cartridges and handed them out. The technology was familiar to Strikeforce from their own 24th century, and they confirmed that they knew what they were and how to connect them.

‘Fennec designed them. He’s a genius with computers. Each one has a data-grab algorithm in it, plug them in and they will start pulling the information we need. And they’re designed to be impossible for the Warscout to infect.’

‘Are you sure about that?’ asked Electron nervously.

‘If you knew Fennec, you’d trust him,’ said Fallen Star.

‘Data infection isn’t the only problem,’ said the Major. ‘As soon as we plug these in we will only have a limited time before we’re discovered and every robot in the city homes in on us.’

‘That’s why I’m here,’ said Avatar, cracking his knuckles.

‘You could have done this at any time,’ said Nightflyer. ‘Could have got the data you needed to formulate a plan against the Warscout, I mean. Why wait until now?’

Fallen Star shrugged. ‘Zod,’ was the only answer she gave.

There seemed to be nothing else to say. As plans went, it wasn’t much of one. But that had never stopped Strikeforce before.

Across the river and into the city. Seeing the streets of the once-thriving metropolis so empty was unnerving, but if there were any humans still living here they were not making their presence known. There was the occasional robot patrol, which implied the Warscout thought there was someone worth ‘policing’. But Fallen Star pointed out that they were probably only here because of Strikeforce. Which wasn’t really what they wanted to hear. They avoided the patrols, focusing on their mission objective.

Soon they reached the building Fallen Star was aiming for, which Major Democracy recognised as the city’s central police station from his own timeline. They made their way to a service entrance in a rear alleyway, which Avatar’s strength soon forced open. If alarms sounded they were silent ones. But they had to assume there were alarms and time was short, so they moved fast. Guided partly by Nightflyer’s intuition, partly by Electron’s sensing of the building’s electrical field, they soon found the central computer core. Quickly locating data ports, they plugged in Fennec’s data chips then nervously waited while status indicators crawled across display screens.

Nightflyer prowled around the room, acutely conscious of the passing of time, his nerves alert for any indication that they had been discovered. As usual, the knowledge came to him unconsciously.

‘They’re here,’ he announced calmly.

‘How do you know?’ asked Fallen Star.

‘He just knows,’ said Major Democracy to her, then, to Nightflyer: ‘How long have we got?’

‘No time,’ said Nightflyer, already moving towards the hallway they had entered by. He was joined by Avatar and Fallen Star, while Electron and the Major, according to their plan, stayed to finish the data transfer. At the outside door, he halted, feeling imminent danger. ‘Right outside, setting up an ambush,’ he murmured.

‘Then let’s move faster,’ said Avatar. Digging his fingers into the door, he ripped it clean off and hurled it outside.

A barrage of energy beams converged on the flying door from the left and right, reducing it to scrap. Taking advantage of the door as a distraction, Avatar flew after it. A quick glance showed him robots at either end of the alley. Turning right, he smashed at top speed into the largest robot he could see, toppling it to the ground with a massive crash. Clear of the alley, he saw several more robots of all shapes and sizes—the only common denominator being the array of weapons each one bore—converging on their location.

‘We’re trapped,’ he said into his communicator while dodging energy blasts.

‘We’re done here, we’ll head for the front entrance,’ came the Major’s reply. ‘Get clear and meet us there.’

Nightflyer and Fallen Star sped back through the building, meeting up with the other two in the spacious lobby. High windows showed the wide thoroughfare outside, apparently still deserted.

‘Well, that smells “trap”,’ said Electron.

‘We don’t have many more choices,’ said the Major. From the rear of the building, explosions told them Avatar was creating quite an efficient distraction. ‘Let’s go, and move fast. Split up if we have to, but stay off comms. Rendezvous at the point we crossed the river. Electron, the door?’

Electron mentally felt for the electrical field that controlled the door seals and broke it, causing the door to spring open a lot more quietly than Avatar had handled the back door.

Nightflyer had already started moving, but Fallen Star was ahead of him. Feeling slightly peeved that his role as the impetuous one was being usurped, he also realised that she was faster than he was. As he reached the door, he saw a lone robot sentry had been standing just out of their view and was bringing its energy canon to bear. Fallen Star had already covered the distance to it. Much faster, thought Nightflyer. He paused at the door, watching as she thrust straight fingers at the robot’s chest. The blow, driven by the momentum of her charge, buckled its chest armour and obviously damaged something vital inside, as it immediately buckled to the ground. Nightflyer was impressed. Not just fast, but strong. There was no way he could have damaged something that solid. Between Fallen Star and Avatar, he was beginning to wonder why he was here at all.

Fallen Star turned and waved at them. ‘Come on, it’s clear this—’

Without warning, a spread of rockets exploded around her, throwing her to the ground. A second robot had been silently hovering high above them. Nightflyer sprinted forward, presenting himself as a target to give the dazed Fallen Star time to get out of danger. A single rocket flew at him but he avoided its explosive radius with ease. That’s something I can do that she can’t, he thought. Then a spread of four rockets bracketed him, concussive force knocking him flat. Recovering instantly and rolling back to his feet, he reached Fallen Star as Electron fired a bolt of electricity at the flying robot and exploded it in mid-air.

‘Are you ok?’ Nightflyer asked.

‘Winded,’ came the reply as Fallen Star sat up. ‘Don’t worry, I’m pretty tough.’

Not as tough as me, Nightflyer almost said, but bit his tongue.

‘We seem to be clear,’ Fallen Star said. A quick look around—including up in the sky—seemed to confirm this, but Nightflyer still felt uneasy. Before he could say anything, however, a new threat appeared in the characteristic flash of a teleport beam, directly between him and Fallen Star. Nightflyer looked at the new arrival and gaped, his jaw literally dropping open. Though every nerve screamed at him to take evasive action, he was literally frozen with surprise when a beam of solid, black energy struck him like a pile driver and smashed him backwards.

The attacker was his old team-mate, Black Swan.

To be Continued ...