

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter 24: Swan Song (Remastered)

6 March 2351. ❖
Five days before Strikeforce die. ❖
Trapped in a divergent future timeline, Strikeforce are attempting to ❖
set history right. ❖
I have deployed my most powerful asset to ensure that they fail. ❖

Major Democracy and Electron saw Black Swan appear in a teleport beam between Nightflyer and Fallen Star.

‘Major—’ said Electron.

‘I see.’

‘It’s—’

‘I see,’ snapped the Major. ‘Assume she’s—’

The word ‘hostile’ died on his lips as Black Swan took the almost-unstoppable Nightflyer out of action with a single blast of energy. Without another word, the Major and Electron moved forward to engage the threat.

Fallen Star didn’t need anyone to tell her that Black Swan was hostile. Hostile and extremely dangerous. Shaking off the lingering aftereffects of the missile explosions that had temporarily stunned her, she pushed herself to her feet and launched a flurry of punches at Black Swan. Fallen Star’s hands were as fast as her feet, and few people could avoid her attacks. Black Swan didn’t even try to. All but invulnerable, she took punches that could buckle steel, without flinching. Then she took to the air and pirouetted to fix her gaze on Electron and the Major, as if Fallen Star were inconsequential.

A beam of black energy from Black Swan’s palm was met by a bolt of green bio-energy from the Major, the opposing forces expending themselves harmlessly in mid-air. Simultaneously, Electron’s electrical bolt hit Black Swan, momentarily shaking her.

‘Black Swan, it’s us!’ said the Major, taking advantage of the few seconds it took her to pull herself together. His bio-energy took time to recharge, and he couldn’t unleash another blast like that in a hurry, whereas she probably could.

‘She knows it’s you, that’s why she’s trying to kill you! Blast her again!’ shouted Fallen Star.

‘You don’t understand, she’s—’

Whatever the Major was about say was cut off by another blast from Black Swan. At the same instant, Nightflyer crashed into him, knocking him safely out of the way.

‘I think it’s safe to say she’s trying to kill us,’ said Nightflyer.

‘You’re ok?’ asked the Major.

‘Good enough,’ said Nightflyer. He didn’t bother enumerating the injuries that his rapid healing ability was already dealing with.

Black Swan gestured, and the entire front of the building behind them came crashing down. Nightflyer flung himself clear, and the Major used his shield to protect himself from rubble, but Electron was too far away for either of them to help. He was struck by flying bricks and fell, to be engulfed by a cloud of dust.

‘Do you think she’s got a lot more powerful?’ Nightflyer asked the Major.

Major Democracy ignored the question while running to where Electron was lying unmoving beneath several large rocks. 'I need to dig him out, keep her occupied,' he instructed Nightflyer.

'Uh, yes, she's *flying*,' Nightflyer pointed out.

At that moment, to Nightflyer's relief, Avatar flew into view. 'What's all the noise?' he asked. Then, incredulous: 'Black Swan? How did you get here?'

'It's not our Black Swan,' Nightflyer began to explain. 'It's—oh, never mind, just hit her.'

Avatar didn't need to be told twice to hit something. He accelerated towards Black Swan.

And suddenly accelerated directly down towards the ground instead, slamming into it with a thunderclap and an impact that left an Avatar-shaped imprint in the concrete. He lay there, conscious but not able to move.

'Avatar?'

'Mmph?'

'She controls gravity,' said Nightflyer to himself as realisation dawned. 'Avatar, change of plan, use magic on her!'

'Mmph,' said the demon.

'Oh, we are so chewed,' said Nightflyer, unconsciously falling back into 30th-century speech patterns. Black Swan was still hovering thirty metres in the air, and they had no one else who could fly.

But Black Swan seemed to be focused on Avatar, as if maintaining the intense gravity field around him was taking her full concentration and she didn't see the others as a threat. That bought them an opportunity to act—for as long as it took her to crush the life out of Avatar, anyway. From the look of the cracks spreading through the concrete floor around the demon, that might not be long.

Nightflyer's eyes darted to where Fallen Star was standing as helplessly as he was. Distances and angles were unconsciously calculated as a plan formed in his mind. He sprinted towards Fallen Star.

'Throw me,' he shouted.

He was travelling at over thirty metres a second as he reached her. Anyone else wouldn't have registered his words, let alone reacted in time, but Fallen Star was a mutant speedster, faster even than Nightflyer, with a practical reaction time an order of magnitude greater than a baseline human. As he reached her, she was bending and making a stirrup of her hands. Nightflyer stepped into it and she straightened, using her speed as well as her considerable strength to lift him high into the air, adding to his own momentum and redirecting it straight towards Black Swan.

This is going to hurt, thought Nightflyer as he tucked himself into a ball.

Black Swan had become aware of the manoeuvre and was turning to defend herself, but to Nightflyer's eyes she was moving in slow motion. She had barely begun to turn when he smashed into her with a bone-jarring impact.

The pair tumbled through the air. Given Black Swan's natural toughness, Nightflyer doubted he had hurt her much at all, whereas he had probably broken several bones. But he had broken her concentration, and he hoped that was enough. He flung out the arm which felt least damaged, grabbed her leg, and pulled himself up her body.

She spoke for the first time as he looked into her eyes. 'You cannot beat me.' Her fist smashed into his ribs with much greater strength than he remembered her ever possessing, but he maintained his grip.

'I don't need to,' wheezed Nightflyer. 'Because we're ... a team.'

Her eyes widened with realisation a fraction of a second before Avatar's punch connected with her head. Then they closed. Nightflyer relaxed his grip as they both started to fall towards the Earth, thankfully under normal gravity.

'A catch would be ... useful, Avatar,' he murmured before consciousness left him.

'Oh sure, I have to do everything!' grumbled the demon as he grabbed his teammate. Black Swan he just let fall.

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Nightflyer came to in an alley in another part of the city.

'Where am I?' he asked, unoriginally.

Major Democracy was bending over him. 'We relocated. You've been out about ten minutes. I was starting to get worried.'

'Yeah, that's virtually a coma for you,' Electron quipped. His costume was torn and he was bleeding from a superficial cut to his head but he otherwise seemed unharmed. In fact, he looked better than Nightflyer currently felt.

Nightflyer saw that Avatar and Fallen Star were also there, keeping watch at either end of the narrow alley they were currently hiding in. Then his gaze fell on the motionless figure of Black Swan.

'Seriously?' he asked.

'We need to question her,' said the Major. 'And ...'

'And de-program her? That's what you're thinking, isn't it?'

'She used to be good, so we—'

'No,' Nightflyer interrupted. '*She* didn't used to be good. This isn't our world, isn't our Black Swan.'

'There are parallels ... I mean, look at this Fallen Star. Grew up completely differently, but inside, she's the same woman I knew in our timeline.'

Nightflyer looked at Electron for support. Electron just shrugged. 'It's a nature over nurture question, and nobody's ever answered that definitively,' he said.

'You're both crazy.'

'I've been telling them that for the last ten minutes,' said Avatar.

'Zod will never allow you back in the base with her,' said Fallen Star. 'She is literally humanity's number one enemy. Not just a traitor, but totally in the thrall of the invaders. And so powerful ... well, you saw. If she get free, or, worse, if she somehow sends a message to her masters pinpointing the base, everything we've built is lost.'

'Nevertheless,' said the Major, stubbornly. And Nightflyer knew that he would get his way.

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'No,' said Zod, firmly. He had met them at the entrance to the hidden resistance base, along with several of his most powerful people: Centurion, Serval, Viper, Killervolt, Fennec, and others. 'She's too dangerous. We kill her now.'

'Strikeforce doesn't kill,' said the Major.

'In your utopian past, I'm sure you don't. In case you didn't grasp my briefing yesterday, we're in a war here, for the future of humanity.'

'Even in a war, there are rules,' insisted the Major. 'You say you're fighting for humanity. Where's the humanity in executing helpless prisoners? Don't become what you're fighting.' He addressed his words to all of them, not just Zod.

'She a potentially valuable prisoner, or hostage,' said Fallen Star, unexpectedly backing up the Major.

Nightflyer suspected she was just disobeying Zod as a matter of principle. A stance he could heartily get behind. 'Look, I think we were wrong to bring her here, but we're not executing her,' he said.

Zod's eyes narrowed in anger, and both groups of super-humans held their breaths, tensed for a fight that none of them wanted but that suddenly seemed inevitable.

'This is insane,' said Electron. 'We're on the same side here, stand down everybody.'

'Them first,' said Avatar.

'It's their base,' said Electron.

'Not in our world,' said the demon, illogically.

The armoured scientist called Centurion spoke up. 'Zod, I have a device that can neutralise her powers.'

'Good, that will make it easier to k—'

‘No! That’s not what I meant. Major Democracy is right, we don’t kill humans. There are too few of us left as it is.’

‘It is always possible that we can, what did you call it, de-program her,’ said the cat-like Serval in a thoughtful voice. ‘She could have been one of us, if she was given the chance.’

‘There is good in her,’ said the Major, stubbornly. ‘If Centurion can really dampen her powers, you can keep her here securely and find that good.’

Zod glanced at his people and saw them wavering. He looked back at Strikeforce and saw what had happened. He had built them up too much as the great saviours from the past, and now his people trusted them more than they did him.

‘Very well,’ he said, ‘We chain her up, with a power-suppressor on her, and we use her to learn what she knows.’ He saw both sides relax, and felt that the crisis was passed. He could afford to allow Strikeforce to win this one. After all, it was only another five days until they vanished into the past once more. How much more damage could they possibly do in five days?

‘And what is your next plan?’ he asked, cautiously.

Electron held out a stack of data chips and dropped them into Fennec’s hand. ‘Next, we analyse these,’ he said. ‘And we learn the Warscout’s weaknesses.’

‘How to beat him,’ clarified Avatar.

‘And then we confront him,’ said Nightflyer.

‘And then we beat him,’ said the Major, as if it were a foregone conclusion.

Zod looked at them, appalled. In his mind’s eye he saw the charred bodies of four men returning to the 20th century, as vividly described by his ancestor Carla Zod. How could this day possibly get any worse?

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Just outside the orbit of the Moon, a small, sleek space cruiser dropped out of hyperspace and activated its cloaking field. For several minutes it lay inert, its electronic signature completely masked.

On the bridge the tension became unbearable for Singularity, the ship’s captain and the leader of the Boluscan Star Guard.

‘Were we detected?’ he snapped.

‘Negative,’ replied the woman at the sensor console. ‘No active scans from the planet.’

‘Very well, set a course for low orbit and commence sensor scans.’

Under cover of the most advanced cloaking technology in the galaxy, the cruiser approached the planet and established an orbit. On the bridge, the crew bent over sensor consoles while Singularity waited impatiently. Finally, one reported.

‘Singularity, this makes little sense. I am reading a planetary population far lower than we have projected, and an inconsistent level of technology.’

‘Inconsistent how?’

‘Most of the planet shows a barely level three civilization, yet there are multiple cities of significant size. But all with minimal energy signature, as if they are deserted. I cannot reconcile this at all.’

‘Are we looking at the aftermath of a war, or plague? A mass extinction of humanity?’ Singularity asked.

‘Possibly. Yet I count ... six fusion powerspheres, each one as powerful as anything we possess. What are they doing with all that energy? Oh, wait ... look at this.’

She projected schematics on the main screen. Singularity furrowed his brow. ‘What am I looking at? A hyperdrive?’

‘A hyperdrive. At the south magnetic pole.’

‘They are building starships? Good work, Laana. We can—’

‘No, Singularity, it’s not on a ship. It is at the pole. Attached. Attached to the planet. They are making their planet mobile.’

‘That’s not possible.’

She shrugged. ‘I would have said so. But it is what it is.’

Singularity sat down heavily. He looked around at his small crew. Himself, and four women of the elite Satellite combat corps. Plus Starburst down in the engine room. He would match any one of them against the most powerful villains in the Emissariate of Bolusca.

But this was something bigger than expected. He weighed conflicting priorities. To return to Bolusca for reinforcements and give the Terrans time to act pre-emptively? To continue the mission alone and risk discovery and failure?

‘Singularity,’ said the woman at the communications console, ‘I am picking up transponders on a ... no, on two ... three ... three Star Guard communicators.’

Singularity was on his feet and looking over her shoulder at her console.

‘That’s not possible!’ he said for the second time today. ‘The world is interdicted, and we are the only Star Guard assigned here.’

‘But nevertheless, it is a fact. Look. The codes are not current, though. I have never seen anything like this.’

‘Not current?’ Singularity’s brow furrowed at a sudden memory. ‘Pull up mission archives from three hundred cycles ago, search for the keyword “Strikeforce”.’

Satellite looked puzzled as her fingers danced over the keys of her console. ‘That is a very long time ago, Singularity. And I have never heard of—oh!’ She stopped as a file began scrolling across her screen. Over her shoulder, Singularity read the mission log recorded by his ancestor, the first to bear the code name ‘Singularity’, more than three hundred Boluscan years ago. She turned to look questioningly at him.

Singularity sat back in the command chair and considered the situation. Deviating from his orders to go in search of something his famous ancestor may have once left on this planet could jeopardise not only the mission but the entire Emissariate he was sworn to protect.

On the other hand, if the stories he had heard at his grandfather’s knee were true, and if there were any chance that Strikeforce ...

He made his decision.

‘Laana, plot the coordinates of those communicator beacons. And then join me in the teleport room.’ He triggered the ship’s intercom. ‘Starburst, would you care to join us planetside? I may have found some old friends of yours.’

‘Weeeeeeeeeee,’ came the affirmative from the engine room.

To be Continued ...