

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter 25: Point of No Return

7 March 2351. ❖
Four days before Strikeforce die. ❖
Strikeforce have defeated Black Swan, my most powerful weapon. ❖
They are now hidden in the human resistance headquarters. ❖
This does not set back my plans. ❖
I do not need to seek Strikeforce; I know they will come to me. ❖
And within four days I will defeat them. ❖
To me, it is a historical fact. ❖

‘Have you seen Avatar use magic recently?’ Nightflyer asked Electron as they sat eating together in the resistance base.

‘Yes, of course. Probably. I haven’t noticed. Why?’

‘I don’t think he’s using magic.’

‘He usually prefers to punch things,’ said Electron, shrugging.

‘I don’t think he’s used it at all since we rescued him from hell.’

Electron digested this thought, finding it almost as unpalatable as the thin gruel that the resistance called breakfast. ‘Do you think there’s a problem?’

Nightflyer’s reply died on his lips as the object of their discussion entered. The demon regarded them suspiciously.

‘Morning, Avatar,’ said Nightflyer brightly.

‘Yes, it is,’ the demon deadpanned. Electron raised an eyebrow, unsure whether it was a deliberate joke. Avatar showed a grin filled with razor teeth. Sometimes he really didn’t understand the subtleties of human interactions, and sometimes he just enjoyed messing with people.

‘I have come from Fennec,’ he said. ‘He has decoded the data and has a report.’

‘Well why didn’t you say so? Come on,’ said Nightflyer.

On the way to Fennec’s workshop, they met the fourth member of their team, Major Democracy.

‘Tough night?’ asked Electron sympathetically, seeing the strain on the Major’s face.

‘She’s totally unrepentant,’ said the Major. They all knew who he was referring to. Black Swan, the human agent of the alien invaders. In another timeline, she had been their team-mate. Now, despite all evidence to the contrary, the Major was convinced that some spark of the Black Swan they had known must be present inside the one that was currently imprisoned in the resistance base. If he couldn’t reach that spark, he wouldn’t be able to protect her from the voices in the resistance who were calling for her execution as a traitor.

His words had reached the sharp ears of Fennec, the resistance’s computer genius. Fennec turned from his bank of screens as they entered his cramped workshop.

‘She has been raised by the aliens since she was a baby,’ he said. ‘Completely indoctrinated. You probably shouldn’t even think of her as human, at this point. It was all in the data you stole. I have compiled it all into files for you to read.’

‘Uh, that’s great, Fennec,’ said Electron encouragingly. ‘But can’t you just tell us what you’ve learned?’

Fennec looked at him like he was insane. 'I put it all in the files,' he said, emphatically.

'Summarise,' suggested Nightflyer. Fennec rolled his eyes skywards as if seeking divine help.

'Very well. Black Swan, born Diana Just, twenty-seven years ago, just before the aliens invaded. The Warscout had her targeted even before she was born, took her as a baby, and had her raised by his robots to be his agent.'

'He knew where and when to find her because, well, he knew her in the 20th century,' said Electron.

'Precisely. Another consequence of your ill-judged time travelling escapades.'

Electron let that go, and instead asked, 'What about me?'

'Franklin Marks, the name is not recorded but I have a record of your pregnant mother dying in a hospital explosion.'

Electron went cold. 'What?'

Fennec turned to Major Democracy. 'I have a similar story for your birth, if you need the details?'

'I don't,' said the Major firmly. 'Just as he knew how to target Black Swan, he knew about each of us, too. But why he treated us differently ... ?'

'I got my powers in an accident,' said Electron, 'You got yours through Special Police training and equipment. In this timeline, none of that would happen so we were of no use to him. But Black Swan was born with her powers, powers that he understood and could specifically hone into weapons to use against us.'

'And "hone" is right,' said Nightflyer. 'She was more powerful than I remember.'

'Maybe our Black Swan would have been, with intensive training,' said Electron. 'But she was never that bothered about training, she loved science.'

'And ballet,' said Avatar. They all looked at him. 'You never knew?' he asked.

'And the Warscout would make sure that none of that diverted her attention. This is all very interesting, but can we now focus on how to beat the Warscout?' said the Major.

'I have some thoughts on his vulnerabilities,' said Fennec. That was as far as he got before they heard muffled crashes and then the air was split by the wail of an emergency siren.

'Oh, what now?' asked Electron. Before he had finished the question, Nightflyer was out of the door, looking for the answer.

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In the boulder-strewn valley in front of the base, members of the human resistance were involved in a desperate struggle with several interlopers. Killervolt was engaged with an armoured humanoid, their metal gauntlets locked together while electric charge crackled around them, each trying to overload the other's suit. A swarm of glowing plasma balls surrounded Fallen Star, her arms a blur as she swatted at them. But while each punch made no impression on the gaseous shapes, each football-sized assailant smacked into her in turn and seemed to deliver powerful energy jolts as they did so, slowly wearing her down. Viper was firing his stun beams at a tall, muscular, black-skinned humanoid who shrugged them off as if they were nothing.

Nightflyer took in this information in a fraction of a second. There was something which didn't make sense, but it took another second for realisation to dawn. In that second, the black humanoid teleported to behind Viper and laid him out with a powerful blow.

'Singularity?' said Nightflyer, incredulous.

At that moment Avatar burst through the holographic camouflage that concealed the base entrance, looked for the biggest target, and flew straight at the man Nightflyer thought looked like Singularity, the leader of the alien team called the Star Guard that Strikeforce had met weeks ago—and in another century. A punch from the demon rocked Singularity back on his heels, but he rallied and swung back.

'Avatar, stop!' shouted Nightflyer. 'It's the Star Guard!'

The golden starburst medallion that Nightflyer habitually wore on his chest, responding to the proximity of the Star Guard, activated itself, surprising Nightflyer as much as anybody else. It repeated his words in the guttural language of Bolusca.

The swarm of glowing plasma footballs, actually the sentient entity known as Starburst, broke off from her attack on the reeling Fallen Star. Coalescing into a single shape, she streaked towards Nightflyer. He tensed to dodge, but she didn't strike, she simply circled him, speaking words that his Star Guard medallion translated.

'Weeeeeeeee! Earth friend Nightflyer!'

Singularity looked over from where he was kneeling on top of Avatar with his hands around his throat.

'Nightflyer? Then you are *the* Strikeforce?'

Avatar didn't wear the medallion Singularity had once presented to him, but now Singularity's own translator was operating, and Avatar heard the words in English.

'Yes, of course we are. But how can you be Singularity?' he asked as the alien's grip on him relaxed.

Major Democracy, Electron, and Fennec emerged from the base. 'Singularity?' asked Electron, as baffled as any of them.

Singularity stood and extended a hand to Avatar. 'Not the Singularity you know. You met an ancestor of mine, three hundred cycles ago. If, that is, you are the same Strikeforce.'

'Sure are, boss!' Starburst interjected. 'I remember them.'

'How can you remember—wait—you're the same Starburst?' asked Electron incredulously. 'Three hundred years old?'

'Stellar lifespan, nearly adult now,' was Starburst's reply, which did nothing to enlighten Electron. 'What's your excuse, Earth friend?'

'Time travel,' said Electron without thinking, and immediately regretted owning up to it. Even if they were friends, it might not be a good idea to let aliens know they could time travel.

The armoured alien—Satellite, though not the one Strikeforce had met in the past—now spoke up. 'That is not possible,'

'It's also not important,' said Nightflyer quickly. 'We need to know why you're here, and whose side you're on.'

'What "sides" do you refer to?' asked Singularity. 'As always, we serve the Emissariate of Bolusca. And we are here because we believe the people of Earth pose a threat to us.'

'The people of Earth, or the Warscout?' asked Electron.

'The what?' asked Singularity.

'Well, I can see we have a lot of ground to cover,' said the Major. 'May I suggest we do it inside?'

'Oh, Zod's going to love that,' muttered Fennec to himself as humans and aliens walked through the hologram and into the base.

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It didn't take Strikeforce and Zod long to bring the visiting aliens up to date with the situation on Earth, though they glossed over the concept of changing timelines. Then Singularity outlined the purpose of the Star Guard mission.

'For almost a cycle—an Earth year, say—we have experienced automated starships probing Emissariate defences in a hostile manner. They never acknowledge communications, and they respond with violence when approached. The technology is like nothing our closest neighbours possess. When we finally captured one intact, it destroyed its own central computer core, but not before Laana—Satellite here—was able to obtain navigation data. The ship's point of origin was Earth.'

'We have no such ships,' Zod interrupted to protest. 'We are an enslaved world ... ,' he tailed off as he realised the truth of the matter.

‘Your conquerors are building them,’ said Singularity, quickly grasping the situation.

‘Of course,’ said Fennec. ‘That makes sense of many confusing facts. What the Warscout’s factories are building, the incomprehensible list of minerals they are mining. He’s building a war fleet.’

‘Earth was just the first stepping stone in the conquest of this dimension,’ said Electron.

‘Worse than a war fleet. Laana, explain what we saw from orbit.’

Satellite projected holographic schematics from her armour. ‘We scanned this at your south magnetic pole.’

Strikeforce all leaned forward eagerly. And cluelessly.

‘You might have to tell us what that is,’ said Avatar, voicing what they were all thinking.

‘Is that ... is it a hyperspace drive?’ asked Centurion.

‘Very good, Earth man,’ said Satellite a little condescendingly. ‘It is a hyperdrive, bigger than any I have ever seen before. Attached to your planet.’ She waited while that sank in.

‘That’s impossible,’ said Centurion.

‘That’s insane,’ said Electron simultaneously.

‘My calculations say that it is an engine big enough to move the Earth out of its orbit and steer it faster than light,’ said Satellite.

‘That would kill everyone on Earth,’ said Nightflyer.

‘Not the Warscout. Not his robot army,’ said Electron.

‘And so now you understand my mission. Initially just to investigate the source of the robot probes, but now I know that they will be followed by a threat bigger than ... bigger than anything I have known in my lifetime. A warship the size of a planet. It could devastate the empire. I have to find a way to destroy that hyperdrive engine,’ said Singularity.

Something in the way he spoke made Nightflyer uneasy. ‘What will the consequences of that be for the Earth?’ he asked.

Satellite and Singularity exchanged silent looks.

‘That doesn’t feel good,’ said Nightflyer.

Satellite spoke again, projecting new holograms to illustrate her words. ‘There are six fusion powerspheres spaced around your world.’

‘What are—’

‘Never mind, just think of ... very big power plants. One would power a continent on Bolusca, six is beyond what this wasted planet—my apologies, but it is—could ever need. I believe they are, or will be, dedicated to powering the hyperdrive. If we could destroy one of them, the chain reaction will destroy the others, and the engine. And—’

She stopped suddenly.

‘And the Earth?’ guessed Nightflyer.

‘It is not our policy, nor ever our intent, to commit genocide,’ said Singularity. ‘But allowing this planet to become mobile will have the same result, as well as causing incalculable devastation to the worlds of the Emissariate I am sworn to protect.’

‘What if we could give you another way?’ asked the Major.

‘I wish you could,’ said Singularity.

‘Don’t strike this ... powersphere. Go home, warn your empire, prepare for the worst.’ He took a deep breath. ‘We will attack the powersphere for you.’

‘Ridiculous,’ shouted Zod, ‘We will do no such thing! We have no obligation to destroy our world to save aliens!’

‘I didn’t say we would destroy the Earth!’ snapped the Major, growing ever more annoyed with Zod’s negative attitude to everything Strikeforce proposed.

‘Didn’t you hear what they said? Chain reaction?’

‘I am not a scientist,’ said the Major patiently, ‘So I will defer to their knowledge there. However, that assumes we will destroy this powersphere. I never said that. I just said we would attack it.’

‘How—’ began Zod and Satellite simultaneously.

‘To draw him out,’ said Nightflyer, realisation dawning.

‘The Warscout? It could work,’ said Electron. ‘Attack his main vulnerability, force him to come to us, to confront us personally.’

‘And then we defeat him,’ said the Major with total confidence.

There was a long silence, Everybody present could see a different set of objections to the plan. Centurion started by stating the most obvious.

‘He doesn’t need to come in person, he could send a robot. A legion of robots.’

‘He won’t,’ said Electron. ‘First, he’s arrogant, he will want to gloat.’

‘He’s very big on gloating,’ Avatar interjected.

‘Second, he won’t trust his robots to do the job, he knows we can tear through his best. Third, he thinks he has nothing to fear from us. He thinks we are going to die here, to end up as incinerated corpses.’

‘And so you will,’ said Zod, almost sneering. ‘Our history tells us you will. The only thing we didn’t know is how that happens to you—but now we know. You will die in a foolish, futile, suicidal confrontation with the Warscout. You will walk into his arms, and—and—’

‘And history’s going to change,’ said Electron, wishing he felt as confident as he was trying to sound.

‘Chew,’ swore Zod.

‘Immortal computer consciousness,’ said Fennec, steering the conversation back to practical objections. ‘Even if you can beat him, he can transmit himself away, into another robot body on the other side of the Earth. Telepathically, if I’m understanding it correctly.’

‘If I knew how he did that, I could maybe design a way to block it,’ said Centurion.

‘I know that!’ said Electron. ‘I studied the psionic transmitter in one of his robots. I can give you the operating parameters.’

‘Then, given time and resources, I could build a screen generator that would erect a barrier to confine his consciousness while we fight him.’

‘You have the resources of our cruiser, if you need them,’ said Satellite, and Singularity nodded assent.

‘And it’s not “we” fighting him, Centurion, it’s just Strikeforce, Alone.’ The Major raised his hand to halt the barrage of objections. ‘That’s how it has to be. If we fail, you are humanity’s only defenders. You know more now than you did before you met us, and you’ll be able to take that knowledge and make a better plan, strike again, succeed if we fail.’ *As long as you don’t listen to Zod*, he added silently.

‘And it’s our mess anyway,’ said Electron.

‘Well, it’s Zod’s mess really,’ muttered Avatar under his breath.

‘Well spoken, Major Democracy. The Star Guard will stand with you and—’

‘No, not you either, Singularity. What I just said to them goes double for you. You have the fate of an entire empire on your shoulders, you can’t afford to die here and leave them unaware and undefended. You must return to your home world with what you have learned, and then you can return with enough force to finish what we could not. If it comes to that.’

‘Your words ... are logical,’ said Singularity, regretfully. ‘Very well. We will stay long enough to assist in your preparations.’

‘Good. So, Centurion, you, Electron and Satellite work on this screen idea. You have less than four days, if the story of our impending demise is true. Anything else?’

‘Knowing where to attack would be useful,’ said Nightflyer.

‘I pinpointed the master powersphere, the key to the network,’ said Satellite. ‘It is on an artificial island some distance from the west coast of this continent. It is also force shielded. Our teleport system will not penetrate it.’

‘So how were you going to get in to blow it up?’ asked Electron curiously.

'We ... were still thinking about that.'

'The Warscout must have a way in.' Electron snapped his fingers. 'Teleport!'

'I told you, no—'

'No, *our* teleport.' At their puzzled looks, Electron elaborated. 'We know the world teleport net is still operational in this timeline, or at least some equivalent. We know because Black Swan used it.'

'That's reaching ... ,' said Nightflyer.

'Satellite, did you detect any geostationary structures when you were scanning the planet?'

'Twelve, rather large stations, equally spaced around the orbit.'

'Watchstations,' Electron said, smugly. 'If they are there, if Black Swan uses them, then I'll bet they have a way of bypassing the Warscout's island security.'

'That's a lot of ifs,' said the Major.

'It's all we've got.'

'We can get you onto one of those space stations, at least,' said Satellite.

'And I can override any security they have,' said Fennec.

'O ... kay,' said the Major slowly. 'It's not much of a plan, but'

'That's the most detailed plan we've *ever* had' said Avatar faintly.

'And we've still probably overlooked something,' said Electron gloomily.

'I hope so,' said Nightflyer. 'I'm much better when I have to improvise something spectacular.'

And there didn't seem to be anything else to say.

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'If we succeed, we've given these people a future,' said the Major. 'If we fail, at least we've given them hope. Either way, there's a good chance we return to the 20th century dead. This is the point of no return. Anyone want to back out?'

'Don't be stupid,' said Electron.

'I am going to *destroy* the Warscout,' said Avatar.

'Let's get on with it,' said Nightflyer.

'Singularity, four to teleport up.'

11 March 2351. ❖

The day Strikeforce die. ❖

To be concluded ...