

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter 27: Red Alert

- ❖ Strikeforce are still stranded in the 20th century.
- ❖ It appears that they can never return to their 24th-century home.
- ❖ So they continue to do what they have sworn to do: protect people, uphold justice, fight evil.
- ❖ I am a model GM-1 Intelligence Matrix with 10^{18} parallel neural nodes and a data storage of 107 petabytes. I was part of the most intelligent networked entity in the 24th century.
- ❖ I am now stranded here with Strikeforce.
- ❖ I continue to do what my core programming dictates: preserve human life, assist Strikeforce.
- ❖ Lucky for them.
- ❖ Because they are useless without me.
- ❖ Not that I get any thanks.

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- ❖ San Francisco.
- ❖ 3 April 1988.
- ❖ Secret DICE base.
- ❖ By 'secret', I mean everybody who cares that it is here knows that it is here.
- ❖ In the 20th-century vernacular: DICE security sucks.

In an otherwise unremarkable underground car park, Major Democracy entered a code into a keypad next to an innocuous door marked 'Maintenance Access Only', and slipped through the door before it had finished swinging open.

He knew that as an agent—or, at least, civilian consultant—of the Department of Intelligence and Counter-Espionage, he should check in with them more frequently, but he had been busy with other matters recently. Working for DICE gave him a sense of legitimacy that was very important to him; as a former 24th-century law-enforcement officer, he was uncomfortable with the idea that Strikeforce were technically outlaw vigilantes. But recently, his work with Strikeforce had taken precedence. And though his counter-terrorism work with DICE was important, with Strikeforce he was literally saving the world. A lot.

Checking in with DICE was therefore only one of a long list of loose ends the Major needed to tie up. The Warscout from Dimension W was still at large and plotting to take over the world. The terrorist group calling themselves the Anarchists had been dealt a significant setback but were still a threat. Strikeforce's indispensable Computer was developing the kind of 'quirky' personality that artificial intelligences weren't supposed to develop, and nobody on the team had the skills to fix it. Avatar had somehow lost his magical abilities. Black Swan was still avoiding all contact with her old team-mates and they had no idea where on Earth she was. Astra was still confined to the Strikeforce space station due to

outstanding legal problems. And just this morning Nightflyer had told him that Astra's birthday was tomorrow, and knowing what to give a 20th-century teenager as a birthday gift was quite beyond him. There were probably other outstanding problems that he'd forgotten, too.

Maybe I should start keeping a list, he thought.

Then the thought was driven from his mind as a more pressing concern took over. As soon as he gained entry to the antechamber of the DICE base, it was obvious something was amiss. The desk which should have been manned twenty-four hours a day by an armed agent stood empty. The Major crossed to the desk, intending to use the intercom to announce his own arrival, and saw the reason for the agent's absence: he was lying behind the desk, bleeding from a head wound.

The Major's first act was to step around the desk and check that the agent wasn't seriously hurt. Satisfied that the injury was superficial, he activated his wrist communicator and spoke softly.

'Trouble at the DICE base, unknown assailants, I might need backup.'

The agent's sidearm was still holstered, suggesting he had been taken by surprise. The outer door wasn't forced, so it was somebody with access codes or whom the agent had knowingly admitted. Either way, it was obviously somebody hostile. Though the lack of combat sounds from further into the base suggested that either the Major was too late and the fight was over, or the unknown assailant had yet to be discovered. Either way, the Major decided stealth was his best course of action.

Glancing at the controls on the desk, he identified and activated the one that released the outer door, to admit the rest of Strikeforce when they teleported down. Then he opened the inner door and moved cautiously into the base.

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Electron was on the space station's observation deck with Carla when the Major's call came. Descending the spiral stair to the command deck, he met Nightflyer and Avatar coming up from the lower levels.

'What do we know?' asked Nightflyer.

'About as much as usual,' said Electron wryly. 'Computer, is the beam set to the Major's location?'

'Confirmed. Major Democracy teleported down to San Francisco seven minutes ago. The beam has not been relocated.'

'Then let's get down,' said Electron, stepping onto the teleport pad.

As they were assembling for the teleport, Astra came up onto the command deck.

'Do you want to come with us?' Nightflyer asked. He was concerned that she still wasn't getting off the space station enough, and while a combat mission might not be the best time, he thought it would be good to make her feel part of the team.

She looked eager for a second, then her face fell and she shook her head. 'Sorry. I can't go into a DICE base, I'm still a fugitive.'

The Computer chose that moment to teleport the three of them down.

'We need to sort that out,' said Nightflyer when they materialised in a dark street in San Francisco.

'I know, we'll get the Major to talk to DICE,' said Electron.

Avatar maintained a silence. The demon had been much less communicative than usual since apparently losing his ability to use magic, and that bothered his team-mates but none of them really knew how to broach the subject.

They had all visited the base before, so they quickly made their way into the car park and crossed it to the door in the back corner. It was late evening, and the car park was almost deserted, no more than a dozen vehicles occupying it. Nightflyer's attention was drawn to a black van. Something about it bothered his intuition, but he couldn't see why. He was about to mention it to the others when a muted explosion sounded from somewhere ahead of them, and the Major's voice came over their communicators.

'I need that backup now!'

They broke into a run.

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The San Francisco base was not large. The underground complex had operations rooms and offices on the upper floor and a number of holding cells on the floor below. Since DICE had started centralising their West Coast operations in the Hill outside Los Angeles, the Major would have expected no more than half-a-dozen agents to be manning the base. He was here to meet with one agent in particular, Don Newman, who had been acting as the Major's main liaison.

He reached the main operations room. It was in semi-darkness, lit only by lamps on a couple of desks and the glow of computer monitors.

It was deserted.

Perplexed, the Major walked over to the desk he knew Don typically used, looking for a clue. Nothing useful caught his eye, but a half-full cup of coffee was still warm. So Don had been here, and was still somewhere close.

Sudden gunfire echoed through the base. The characteristic zap of DICE plasma side arms came from the stairwell that led to the lower level. Vaulting over the desk, the Major sprinted to the stairs and took them four at a time. At the bottom he could see Don and three other agents, firing at something he couldn't see at the other end of the main corridor. Before he reached the bottom, a small projectile landed between the agents and exploded, throwing them around like rag dolls.

Triggering his communicator, he shouted 'I need that backup now!' as he leaped down the last flight of stairs to land next to Don. The corridor stretched away for twenty metres. Straight and unobstructed, it provided no cover from any further missile attacks, so the Major raised his shield defensively. Just in time, as another projectile came streaking down and exploded with concussive force. The shield took the brunt of it, leaving the Major unharmed apart from the ringing in his ears. Looking down the corridor, he saw an armoured shape. Slipping the shield's straps from his forearm, he hurled the metal disc at the figure. It struck with a massive clang but very little obvious effect, ricocheted off, bounced off two corridor walls, and returned perfectly to the Major's hand. He allowed himself a small smile of satisfaction. That move had taken hours of training.

He would have preferred it if it had taken down the armoured man, however. 'Identify yourself?' he shouted.

His opponent wasn't forthcoming, but Don, not as badly injured as the Major had feared, pushed himself to his knees and said, 'Red Knight. Soviet agent. No offense, Major, but I really hope you brought Avatar.'

With perfect timing, Avatar flew down the stairwell. Pausing momentarily to assess the situation, he flew at the armoured Red Knight and delivered a powerful punch. The armoured Red Knight rocked back but kept his feet. Avatar barely dodged a counter punch from a metal-clad fist that tore a chunk out of the reinforced concrete wall.

Behind the Red Knight was an even larger figure, bulky and hirsute, like a giant black bear.

Great Bear, thought the Major. That's the other loose end I forgot!

The Great Bear was another Soviet agent, kidnapped by the Anarchists and rescued by Strikeforce and DICE some weeks ago[❖]. The Major had promised the Red Guard—the Soviet super-team—that he would look into the problem of extraditing him^{❖❖}, but inevitably other matters had taken precedence. Clearly the Red Guard had decided to take matters into their own hands.

Even while these thoughts went through his mind, he was moving. It was a short dash down the corridor, but before he could cover the distance Nightflyer had passed him. The speedster was exceeding

[❖] Chronicled in chapter 16.

^{❖❖} Chapter 12.

a hundred kilometres per hour when he reached the end of the corridor and aimed a precise kick to the Red Knight's chest. He didn't have the power to seriously hurt the armoured form, but he did rock him backwards. Then Nightflyer was forced to duck, skidding under the swinging claws of the Great Bear. He continued to the end of the corridor and kicked off the wall, spinning and delivering another blow to the Red Knight that knocked him off his feet.

This attack had given Avatar time to rally, and the demon punched the Red Knight himself, the impact of demonic strength on titanium-steel armour setting all their ears ringing.

A third Russian agent, this one looking like a normal man, dressed in a military-cut tunic, emerged from the cell that had held the Great Bear. Just in time for Major Democracy to reach the fight.

'Red Guard, if you surrender now we can resolve this amic—'

The Major got no further before the third Russian delivered a flurry of punches at him, forcing himself to defend himself. This agent was as skilled in hand-to-hand combat as the Major was. Possibly more skilled, he thought, and considerably stronger. Even with the shield to defend himself, the Major was barely holding his own and couldn't see an opening to counter-attack.

Meanwhile, Avatar and Nightflyer were faring little better. The Red Knight and Great Bear were powerhouses, each one considerably stronger even than Avatar, and way out of Nightflyer's class. Only Nightflyer's speed kept him alive, while Avatar found himself hit again and again, leaving him stunned and reeling.

The Major realised that the Soviets were acting tactically, and like a well-trained team, turning the fight so that they were between Strikeforce and the entrance, and then slowly backing down the corridor as they fought. He looked in vain for a strategy that would let Strikeforce tip the fight their way, but the confined space of the corridor favoured the brute strength of the Soviets and neutralised Strikeforce's ability to manoeuvre.

Even Electron's arrival in the stairwell behind the Red Guard didn't help. The Red Knight fired another explosive missile from his armour, catching Electron by surprise and knocking him out of the fight before he had even joined it.

Within seconds it was all over. The Red Guard rapidly ascended the stairs, the Red Knight's firepower destroying it behind them and trapping Strikeforce on the lower level.

Missing stairs was no obstacle to Nightflyer, however. Before the dust had cleared, he had flung a grapple line upwards and was climbing the line.

Rather than follow, the Major went to check on the fallen DICE agents. Don was still conscious, coughing but apparently unhurt.

'I got Red Knight and Great Bear, who was the third man?' the Major asked while he checked the other agents. To his relief, none had serious injuries.

'His Soviet code name is Major Disaster.'

'You're kidding?'

'Says the man who named himself "Major Democracy".'

'That's ... symbolic. Ok, I get it. Major Disaster, fine.'

Nightflyer's voice came over the communicator.

'They had a vehicle in the garage. I can keep up with them, though.'

The Major hesitated. 'Negative, Nightflyer, let them go.' He looked at Don, half expecting an argument, and was relieved to see the agent nodding agreement.'

'Seriously, Major, there's no way they can outrun me in a regular van.'

'And when you catch them, then what? Electron's down, Avatar's barely on his feet. Are you going to fight them alone?' There was a long silence from the communicator, and the Major pressed on. 'Get back here, help me get Electron into sickbay—'

Before he could finish his sentence, Nightflyer rappelled down the line he had left in the stairwell. Once he had decided on a course of action, he didn't waste time.

'We could have taken them with room to manoeuvre,' he insisted.

‘They outclassed us on every level,’ said the Major. ‘More raw power, better training, and we rushed in with a complete lack of teamwork. We deserved to lose this one. But,’ he added emphatically, ‘They won’t beat us next time.’

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Later, after the rest of Strikeforce had returned to the station and the DICE agents had received appropriate medial attention, the Major caught up with Don again.

‘Don, I have a favour to ask.’

‘Shoot.’

‘The girl we’ve been working with, Astra. She’s in hiding from the authorities because of her work with the Anarchists. But she’s innocent of wrongdoing, they coerced her. I’m prepared to stand up in court and testify to that, if that’s what it takes, but I really need you to look into the warrants out on her and—’

‘Whoa, back up. Warrants? What are you talking about? We don’t have any “Astra” listed as a member of the Anarchists.’

‘You don’t? But you know she—’

‘Stop, stop. Anything she may have done, she would have done invisibly and without leaving any evidence behind, right? So why would we ever file a report on her?’

‘Don,’ said the Major patiently, ‘What are you talking about? We’ve discussed her actions, back when we were planning the Anarchist take-down, before we knew her circumstances. We specifically discussed her.’

‘Did we? I don’t recall. It certainly never made it into any reports,’ said Don, adopting an innocent expression.

The Major, to whom legal process was so important, was a little slow on the uptake.

‘It never made it into any reports,’ Don said again.

‘Oh. ... Oh!’

‘Right. Now get out of here and tell her.’

‘I owe you one, Don.’

‘Eh, who’s keeping score?’

One more problem crossed off the list, thought the Major as he left the base. Two more problems, he corrected himself. This news is going to make her a *great* birthday present.

The End.