

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter 28: Time Again

- ❖ 12 May 2351.
- ❖ Earth Space Cruiser *Pittsburgh*, Captain Dante commanding.
- ❖ En route from Titan to Earth, carrying Special Police officers Fallen Star, Fennec, Photon, Serval, and Thumper.

Fennec sat at a computer station on the bridge of the *Pittsburgh* and uneasily watched status indicators all show green. The ship had entered its deceleration phase, its fusion drive whittling away their massive interplanetary velocity in preparation for their docking in Earth orbit six hours from now. Captain Dante had gone to his cabin to get some rest before personally handling the delicate docking manoeuvres, leaving the pilot's console in the capable hands of Fennec's fellow Special Police officer Photon.

'Photon, status check.'

In the pilot's seat, Photon sighed and paused his game of *Megalacticoids*. 'Still all green, Fennec. Quit asking, you're going to make me as jumpy as you.'

'Something feels wrong.'

'What's going to go wrong way out here?' Photon waved his hand vaguely at the forward view screen, which showed uninterrupted black, with a green icon indicating the position of the Earth, still an invisible dot at this distance. 'If anything big enough to damage us comes in range, the computer will automatically move us out of its way—'

'Confirmed,' said the ship's computer.

'—and we've even got a particle canon to defend ourselves if you're worried about hostile aliens.'

'The Council of Science has ruled there is no such thing as aliens,' said Fennec flatly.

'You need to lighten up little buddy,' said Photon, his light-based powers making green sparkles in the air to emphasise his words. 'The ship's cruising smoothly, all systems green, and Captain Dante verified our course just before he left the bridge. We're fine and dandy.'

'Have you ever shipped with Dante before?'

'No, he's specialised on these deep space runs, and I've never been out to Titan before.'

'Me neither. I wonder if any of us have,' Fennec's analytical mind went back over the various shipboard conversations of the last few days. It seemed as if none of his fellow Special Police officers knew Dante personally before this trip to Titan. 'Computer, open Dante's file.'

'Confirmed.'

Photon rolled his eyes as Fennec read the captain's personal file. 'Little buddy, I know you're paranoid, but this is—'

The phrase 'little buddy' irked the diminutive Fennec, which was quite possibly why Photon had adopted it as a pet name for him. He kept his anger in check. All of Dante's biometric data matched what Fennec's own senses had told him, and there was nothing in his personal background that was at all suspicious. Dante was a civilian space pilot, not a member of the Special Police, but only a man of unquestioned trustworthiness would have been selected to make the run to the penal colony on Titan.

Other than what the file told him, however, Fennec didn't have much sense of the captain as a man, as he had revealed little about himself on the trip. The captain was naturally taciturn, which also matched the profile Fennec was reading in his file, and he hadn't contributed a lot to their conversations, but he had—

Fennec was one of the best detectives in the Special Police, a master at collecting data and intuitively putting it together in ways that led to innovative breakthroughs in tough cases. It helped that he was borderline paranoid.

'Remember when Fallen Star was telling us at dinner about growing up in the Siberia Region?'

'Yes,' said Photon, not remembering at all.

'According to this, Dante was born just a few kilometres away from her. You would think he would have said something.'

Photon shrugged, unconcerned.

Fennec's finger hovered over the ship's intercom, then he changed his mind and raised his Special Police communicator bracelet, whose intelligent circuitry would automatically route a private, encrypted communication to one of his fellow officers.

'Serval,' he said. 'Give me a life count on the ship.'

The cat-like Serval was dozing in his cabin but awoke instantly as Fennec's voice came through. Without questioning the detective, he reached out with his extra-sensory ability to detect lifeforms around him.

'Two on the bridge, one running laps in the rec room, that will be Fallen Star, one in, I think it's Thumper's cabin, one on the cargo deck.'

Fennec's voice came back insistently over the communicator. 'Cargo deck? You're sure? What about Dante's cabin?'

'The captain's cabin is near the bridge and there's only, I guess, you and Photon up that way. And definitely someone in the cargo hold. Why?' Something insistent in Fennec's voice made Serval reach for the lightweight armoured costume that amplified and controlled his natural teleportation powers in addition to protecting him in combat.

'Why is Dante in the cargo hold?'

'Uh ... because he's the captain and it's his cargo?' guessed Serval, pulling on his armour.

'It's all sealed ore pods, I checked them myself before we left Titan. There's nothing to—' Fennec's voice stopped as he put two and two together and got a number he didn't like. Serval's next words confirmed his suspicions.

'Fennec, there's another life sign in the hold. How the chew ... no, two, now three new life signs!'

'Serval, cargo deck. Stealth mode. Report what you see,' Fennec said tersely. His next words were relayed to all the Special Police officers on the ship: 'All officers, alert status red. We've got a prison break in progress. Stand ready for further details.'

Titan was supposed to be escape proof, a colony of the very worst of Earth's criminal fraternity, separated from civilized society by millions of miles of empty space. When you were condemned to Titan, you stayed on Titan. Strictest protocols were in place to ensure that there was never any chance of a prisoner gaining access to the infrequent space ships that visited the colony.

Teleporting silently into the cargo bay and activating his suit's chameleon field to hide him from sight, it didn't take Serval long to realise that those protocols had failed.

Several large, cylindrical canisters, supposedly holding rare ores for shipment back to Earth, were open and empty. The people who had emerged from them were assisting Captain Dante in opening the others, releasing more prisoners. Serval could recognise the unmistakable hulking figure of Blockhead, one of Earth's most dangerous men, and others he thought could be the criminals Viper and Killervolt but without their distinctive costumes. As he watched, another pod was opened and the occupant instantly registered on Serval's life sense.

This was the clue he needed: the 'ore pods' were stasis chambers, each one holding its occupant frozen in a moment of time. That would explain how they had foiled all scanning procedures, including

Serval's own life sense. It left the mystery of how a dozen or more stasis chambers had been allowed to reach Titan in the first place, but that was a mystery Serval would gladly leave to Fennec.

Assuming they all survived the next few minutes.

Fennec listened grimly to Serval's whispered report. Before the report finished, the communicator transmitted a high-pitched whine, followed by a crash, and it went dead.

Fennec hit the all-stations alert. Serval had evidently been discovered and taken out; the need for stealth had passed. Claxons echoed throughout the ship. He raised his communicator once more. 'All officers, we have a mass prisoner escape on our hands. Up to a dozen hostiles, currently in the cargo bay. Meet me there.'

Photon was already on his feet, but before either of them could move a high-pitched frequency split the air as the criminal who called himself Discord teleported onto the bridge. Photon reacted first, firing a powerful laser beam at the criminal. The beam splashed harmlessly against Discord's personal force field, and the criminal responded with a blast of solid sound that knocked Photon off his feet and sent him crashing painfully into the pilot's console.

But the exchange had bought Fennec time to swing into action. From the holsters at his belt, he drew a pair of tonfas, his favoured weapons, and leaped at Discord. From the files, he knew that Discord's personal force field could be overloaded by multiple rapid attacks, and that was what the tonfas, in the hands of a master like Fennec, excelled at. He whirled the stubby clubs by their handles and battered away at Discord until the man went down.

He took a second to confirm that Photon was unconscious, and then wasted no further time in leaving the bridge and making his way down the ship's central corridor.

Thumper had been in his cabin, reading technical journals, when he heard Fennec's alert. Dropping his reading screen, he stood and moved to the cabin door, listening for any signs of a fight. But the claxon drowned out every other sound. Cautiously, he slid the cabin door open.

Thumper was a scientist, not a fighter. So he was slow to react to the man carrying two razor-edged knives who was on the other side of the door. The man lunged with his right hand and Thumper, more by luck than skill, caught the point of the blade on his bionic arm. It skittered off the metal limb, and Thumper was alarmed to see it left a deep scratch. Monofilament edges, he noted with interest, as the assailant's left-hand blade swung towards his throat. Too late, he realised he should be triggering a defence instead of admiring the technology.

A hurled tonfa flew down the corridor and smashed into the man's wrist, sending the knife flying. An instant later, Fennec came into view and his second tonfa knocked the man unconscious.

'Wake up, Thumper! This is the Butcher, he's a mass murderer and you were nearly his next victim.'

Thumper pulled himself together. 'Ok, what's our situation?'

'Uncertain at the moment. We've lost Photon and probably Serval. I've taken down two of them now but there is an unknown number left.'

'Computer—' began Thumper.

'No good asking, they've disabled internal sensors,' said Fennec, anticipating what Thumper was about to ask the ship's computer.

'Ok, I can probably get them back on line if I can get to engineering.'

Fennec weighed up options. Thumper should really stay with him, for safety, but he could move faster and more stealthily alone. And getting internal sensor reports would help him plan a strategy. Fennec hated working with incomplete information.

'Affirmative, try to make it to engineering. Keep out of sight but if you see any of them report to me. And Dante's one of them, consider him hostile.'

Thumper raised an eyebrow in surprise but then nodded his understanding and moved down the corridor in the direction of the engineering section.

As the cyborg scientist's footsteps receded, Fennec instructed the computer to kill the alarm claxon, and strained his super-human hearing for signs of movement. But the ship's ubiquitous background

noises—hiss of recycling air, hum of power systems, muted roar of the fusion drive—masked any sounds the villains might be making.

Cautiously, Fennec continued methodically searching the ship. If luck were on his side, he would encounter the rest of villains one-by-one and defeat them piecemeal.

He hated relying on luck.

The last of the Special Police contingent, Fallen Star, had been in the ship's tiny gymnasium when Fennec's first message came over her communicator. She was on her way to the bridge to get more information when the claxon sounded and Fennec's second message identified the cargo bay as the source of the trouble.

In the cramped confines of the space ship, Fallen Star couldn't reach anywhere near her top running speed. But she could still travel fast enough that she reached the cargo bay long before Fennec, in time to see Serval lying on the deck and being pummelled by a pair of thugs. Without wasting any time, she charged into the conflict. Her whirling fists knocked the two men flying, and she stood over Serval's fallen form to take in the situation.

It wasn't good. There were at least a dozen men in the cargo bay, several of whom she recognised as dangerous super-powered criminals, and all of whom were looking angrily in her direction.

This was a fight she couldn't win. In an instant she had scooped up Serval, effortlessly throwing him over her shoulder, then turned on her heel and ran. As she moved, the alarm claxon cut off. She activated her communicator.

'Fennec, where are you?'

'Port side corridor, on my way to the cargo deck.'

'Don't do that, we're completely outnumbered. We need a plan if we're going to survive this. I'm on the starboard side, I'll cut across and meet you.'

'Agreed.'

At speed, Fallen Star turned a corner and barely stopped in time to avoid running straight into Thumper.

'Thumper! I assumed you were with Fennec.'

'Yes, he's in there,' said Thumper, gesturing into an open cabin. Fallen Star's gaze automatically followed his gesture, and as soon as her eyes were off him he jabbed a neural stunner into her side. The pain was excruciating, followed by a spreading numbness that caused her legs to buckle beneath her. As consciousness fled, she saw Thumper's features melt into those of Captain Dante, then into a new face she didn't recognise.

'In case you're wondering at the betrayal, I'm not Thumper. You won't know my real face but you probably know my reputation—the Stalker!'

But Fallen Star's eyes were already closed, denying the villain a further opportunity to gloat. The Stalker kicked her to confirm she wasn't faking, then shifted shape again, his whole body distorting and gaining a foot of height as he became a perfect replica of the long-legged speedster. He moved off, seeking the remaining Special Police officers.

Around another corner, Fennec had heard this exchange. He was familiar with the Stalker's police file, and the troubling mystery of Captain Dante was now clear. But Fennec didn't consider the Stalker a major threat—he knew he couldn't simulate Fallen Star's speed or strength even when he was in her form. His only weapon was subterfuge, and now that Fennec knew what he was dealing with he trusted his own enhanced senses to see through any further disguises.

His communicator beeped, signalling a message from Thumper—the real Thumper. Fennec hoped it was with good news, because the situation looked otherwise hopeless.

'I'm in engineering. Did you ever come down here?'

'Why would I go to engineering?'

'Well ... no. I never came down either, there's no need on these automated—'

'The point, Thumper?'

‘Yes. Well, there’s something weird.’

‘Define “weird”.’

‘Somebody’s made major modifications. The accelerator feed to the particle cannon has been reconfigured as a graviton conduit.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘Seriously, Fennec, I have no idea. I’ve never seen engineering like it. I don’t know why you would do this—hold on, someone’s coming.’

The communicator went dead. After thirty seconds, Fennec transmitted a query. No response. He now had to assume he was the only police officer still standing.

He should have transmitted a warning to the authorities on Earth *before* the situation had escalated to this level, he realised. Cursing himself for an amateur, he stealthily made his way back towards the bridge.

On the bridge, a black cloaked figure waited silently. Fennec’s senses told him the man was alone, so he drew his tonfas and stepped into the figure’s line of sight. The man’s appearance didn’t match anyone Fennec could remember from police files. He appeared unarmed, and physically unimposing, but that didn’t mean anything in an age when anybody could possess any number of lethal super-abilities. And though the figure’s face was concealed in the shadow of a deep hood, Fennec still felt an aura of confidence radiating from him.

‘Identify yourself,’ Fennec ordered.

‘You know me, Fennec,’ the man said in a rasping whisper.

And, impossibly, Fennec suddenly did know him. Memories of a previous encounter came flooding back.

‘Darkhold! I broke up your cult of followers but you got away. How did I not remember that?’

‘Magic,’ whispered Darkhold.

Fennec didn’t waste any more time talking to a man he—now—knew was more dangerous than any other villain on the ship. He hurled a tonfa, mainly as a distraction while he ducked into a forward roll towards the black magician. His evasive moves were in vain. The tonfa changed course before it struck its target, clattering uselessly to the floor. And a slight hand gesture sent a sheet of black energy sweeping through the bridge. Fennec was picked up in mid attack and smashed unconscious against a bulkhead.

Darkhold triggered the ship’s intercom.

‘Stalker, this is Darkhold.’

‘*Who?*’

Darkhold sighed. ‘You know me.’

‘Oh ... Darkhold. Why didn’t you say so? What’s our status?’

‘The ship is secure. Proceed to phase two.’

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Centurion was mystified, and more than a little concerned. For two days he had been helping to construct a complicated machine, and he had no idea what it was for. And for a man who had one of the finest engineering brains on 24th-century Earth, that was deeply troubling. He had infiltrated the criminal group led by the man known only as the Wraith specifically to discover what their long-laid master plan was, but he felt no closer to that goal now than he had when Special Police Chief Kadnez had proposed the mission to him a month ago.

It had been a simple matter to construct a criminal backstory and a reputation as a freelance underground technician for hire. He had reconfigured his battle armour so it looked nothing like his Special Police armour, while still retaining its formidable array of weapons and defensive systems. And sure enough he had been approached by members of the Wraith’s organisation and set to work on ... this ... whatever it was.

This machine was obviously a key component in the Wraith's plan, and until Centurion understood it his hazardous mission wasn't complete. Several times he had considered blowing his cover, calling in backup, and arresting the whole group, but he knew that would only be doing half a job.

The machine was near completion, that much was obvious to him even when he didn't know its ultimate purpose. He was tempted to sabotage it, but there was too much chance the other engineers working on it would discover it and trace it back to him. Dynamo was a competent scientist (though in Centurion's opinion, too arrogant to be a *great* scientist) and evidently had the Wraith's full trust, and watched Centurion like a hawk. And the Wraith himself was clearly the scientific mastermind behind the machine's design, though he let others perform the manual labour.

So for two days he had been confined to this remote mansion in the California Region, working on this unfathomable machine in this cramped basement, configuring dimensional phase arrays and graviton receptors for he knew not what purpose, all the time in a state of paranoia that he would be discovered, or, worse, would be unable to stop the Wraith from doing something with terrible consequences for the world.

Sylph, one of the Wraith's top lieutenants (though Centurion had no idea why such a vain, empty-headed woman was given so much trust) burst into the basement workshop.

'They're here!' she sang out.

'Who's here?' asked Centurion.

'You'll find out, pal,' said Dynamo. 'Come on, we're all done here.'

Centurion saw that they were indeed all done, as Dynamo snapped shut the panel on the last component Centurion had been welding into place. Dynamo typed some commands on the main console, and power from the mansion's mini fusion plant hummed through the giant conduits. This was it. Decision point. He weighed up the chances of doing irreversible damage to the machine before Dynamo (a physical powerhouse) and Sylph (abilities unknown, but probably considerable) could subdue him. It wasn't worth it. He still needed to know more.

For a start, who 'they' were.

He allowed Sylph and Dynamo to usher him out of the room, and soon joined a dozen or more of the Wraith's superhuman henchmen and armed guards. The Wraith himself was there. And he was watching the skies.

'Ready when you need it, boss,' said Dynamo.

'Soon,' said the Wraith.

Centurion saw the receptor array on the roof of the one-storey building swivel in response to some pre-programmed command, aligning itself to some point above their heads.

At the same time, he heard a low roaring, and a powerful wind whipped around the mansion's sheltered courtyard, raising waves in the small swimming pool.

Baffled Centurion looked up.

Was that a ... *space ship*?

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Fennec woke to find himself somewhere that looked and sounded like part of the ship. At first the cramped space was unfamiliar to him, then he saw it was one of the *Pittsburgh's* two docked orbital shuttlecraft. The rest of his team were here too, all unconscious. And his weapons had been taken.

As soon as he had oriented himself, his first act was to pull open a storage compartment and take out the spare weapons belt he had stashed there at the start of the voyage. With his tonfas and grappling lines reassuringly strapped on, he took a spare communicator from the same storage unit and snapped it around his wrist. Then he saw the time. He had been out for five hours. He must have been hit really hard by ... somebody, he wasn't sure who.

Putting that mystery aside, he retrieved a med kit from a different storage locker and turned to his fellow officers. His enhanced senses had already told him they were all still breathing, so he knelt and administered a stimulant to Serval. Within a minute, the cat-like eyes were flickering open.

‘What hit me?’

‘Uncertain, but probably several people with super-human strength. Get the others conscious.’ Fennec tossed the med kit to Serval, who set about reviving the others with practiced skill while Fennec tapped some queries into a computer console.

When they were all conscious, Fennec related what little he knew, first summarising his impressions of the fight on the ship.

‘Why aren’t we dead?’ asked Fallen Star.

‘Not all criminals are cold-blooded murderers,’ said Serval.

‘Some of this bunch are,’ said Fennec, ‘But most of them don’t have murder on their records, and wouldn’t want to have it added if they could avoid it, especially murder of a police officer. Whatever their ultimate plan—and I am certain they have something other than a jail break in mind—they must have thought it was enough for them to have us disabled and confined here, if they could be reasonably sure we would stay confined for long enough. And we probably have. Five hours means we’re very close to Earth orbit, assuming that’s where the hijackers are headed. Photon, can you confirm?’

The pilot was already seating himself at the shuttle’s helm. ‘Sure are, Fen,’ he said. ‘Our original course was maintained.’

‘Obviously. They don’t want to alert anyone that they are in command of the ship.’

‘But that’s going to be pretty obvious when they reach the orbital dock,’ said Thumper.

‘Yes, they may be planning on the element of surprise to fight their way out of the ship, or they may have some other destination in mind.’

‘This ship doesn’t have any stealth capability, wherever they go they’ll be tracked,’ argued Thumper. ‘They must have some other plan.’

‘Pointless speculating without hard data,’ said Fennec. ‘First we need to know if we can retake the ship. Serval—’

‘Eleven of them,’ said Serval, anticipating the question and reaching out with his life sense. ‘Spread through the ship, but two right outside the shuttle entrance hatch.’

‘That will be two of their toughest close-quarter fighters, who don’t have other skills needed to man the ship ... so ... Blockhead and Crusher,’ said Fennec.

‘Do you know *everything*?’ asked Serval.

Fennec ignored him. ‘I can override the door, but the only one of us with a chance against those two in hand-to-hand combat is Fallen Star—’

‘Against one of them, maybe,’ said Fallen Star, ‘But not in this confined space, I can barely stand up straight let alone fight.’

‘So, alternate plan. Serval, you teleport—’

‘No.’ Serval gestured at his costume. ‘They thought of that. They’ve trashed the energy regulators in my armour.’

‘Hmm. According to your file, you have natural teleport abilities.’

‘Yes, but I can’t use them unaided. I need the tech in the armour to boost and focus them.’

‘I can take a look at it,’ said Thumper. ‘It shouldn’t be difficult to fix, but it might take a while.’

‘We don’t have a while,’ interjected Photon from the helm, a note of urgency in his voice. ‘We’ve just passed the point when they should have gone into a parking orbit, and they haven’t. They’re going to land.’

‘When?’ asked Fennec.

‘Basically, now.’ Photon activated the shuttle’s communicators and switched to an emergency broadcast channel. ‘This is space cruiser *Pittsburgh*, we have a code red alert, we have been—’

His voice was drowned out by a squeal of static from the speakers, which he hastily shut off. 'Well, they're jamming me. I have no more ideas.'

'Prepare to undock the shuttle,' said Fennec.

'Say what?'

'They've got a particle cannon, and attacking a ground target is the only thing that makes sense now. But whatever their target, as soon as they open fire they're going to be attacked by everything in range. We need to be away from here.'

'Copy that,' said Photon, hands dancing over the console. 'Everybody strap in or hold tight. We're already in atmosphere and this will be bumpy.'

'Where are we heading?' asked Fennec as he buckled himself into a seat.

'Looks like ... North American Region, west coast.'

'There's nothing there,' said Thumper, gripping a hand-hold with his bionic arm while he looked over Photon's shoulder. 'Apart from the ruins of old Los Angeles, it's all arid desert and mountains.'

'Well we're only forty kilometres above the desert. We're coming in hot but they *are* decelerating. Looks like they're going to land,' said Photon. His fingers hovered over the undock command. 'Are you sure you want me to do this? Twenty kilometres. I can't guarantee she'll stay in one piece. Ten kilometres. Five. Somebody say something!'

As if in answer, a powerful vibration rumbled through the shuttle.

'They're charging the particle cannon!' said Fennec.

'To fire at *what*?' asked Thumper incredulously.

'Do it, Photon!' urged Fallen Star.

Photon's finger stabbed the control. Mechanical clamps snapped open and the shuttle was free of its mothership. There should be a gentle separation, with no sense of movement at all as the shuttle drifted clear of the ship's mass. But that was in airless space. Nobody had intended an undocking in atmosphere with the *Pittsburgh* rocketing towards the ground and decelerating.

The shuttle scraped against its clamps. Lurched, smashed back into the hull of the main ship, bucked, smashed a second time, and finally kicked away, dropping ahead of the decelerating ship. Once clear of the bulk of the ship, their forward window showed the ground leaping up to meet them at an alarming velocity. To make the feeling of vertigo even worse, that view started spinning crazily.

'Photon!' came four voices at various pitches.

'I'm ... just ... flying ... upside-down to ... avoid radar,' said Photon, wrestling with the controls and babbling the first thing that sprang to mind.

The spin slowed and so did the rate at which the ground approached. Then a blinding beam of energy flashed past them from somewhere behind, and struck something on the ground ahead.

'They're firing at us!' Serval squeaked.

'But luckily I'm flying upside—'

'They're not firing, that was ...' Thumper's voice trailed off. His eyes scanned readouts and tried to make sense of them. 'Ok, Photon, there's a dimensional warp opening on our port side, and you might want to—'

The rest of his advice was lost in a deafening screech of white noise as every metal plate in the shuttle vibrated at a different frequency. There was a worrying lurch to the port side, and the ground vanished into a rainbow of colour.

'I have no helm control!' shouted Photon. 'And what the *chew* is happening?'

'We're teleporting!' shouted Serval, who had some familiarity with the sensation.

'Has a Watchstation got a beam on us?' shouted Fallen Star.

'That's impossible,' shouted Thumper.

The noise and colour stopped as quickly as it had started. And the ground reappeared much closer than it had been a few seconds before.

'Oh, *chew*,' was all Photon had time to say before they hit the ground hard.

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The interplanetary cruiser hovered on its nose half a kilometre above the Wraith's mansion. Not designed for atmospheric flight, it was an ugly, lumpy rectangle with nothing sleek or aerodynamic about it. Centurion realised it was holding itself aloft by careful alignment of its gravity fields, an impressive piece of piloting he had to admit. His own armour used gravity fields for flight, but that was on a tiny scale compared with the energy now being put out by the cruiser. In some alarm, he ran the calculations in his head and realised they couldn't maintain position for more than a couple of minutes without causing some serious space-time distortions. He wasn't sure how that would manifest, but ...

That theoretical catastrophe was replaced by a more practical and imminent one, as he saw the forward-mounted particle weapon—designed to blast asteroids and other space debris out of its path—line up on the mansion and begin to charge up. From the terse sentences passing between Dynamo and the Wraith, he gathered that this was part of the plan. They had hijacked an entire space cruiser to ... blast their own headquarters out of existence?

A blinding white beam lanced from the ship to the ground, precisely striking the receiver on the roof of the building. Strangely, the sensors in Centurion's suit were not registering any of the secondary radiation that a heavy particle discharge in atmosphere should produce. Instead, he was picking up a directional graviton beam ...

And an instant later, he found himself out of phase with the universe, as if in the middle of the widest teleport beam he had ever seen deployed, a beam that encompassed the mansion, the men on the ground, the hovering spaceship, and a shuttle which had come loose from its docking clamps and was falling freely towards the ground. The Wraith was teleporting the whole lot somewhere else, which he grudgingly admitted was technically brilliant, but to all intents and purposes appeared completely pointless.

Even as he analysed the situation, he realised that if he was ever going to act this might be the last chance he got. He raised his armoured hands and from the electrical emitters in his gauntlets he discharged a multi-kilowatt arc at the rooftop antenna. The delicate device exploded into fragments, which had the effect of collapsing the dimensional breach and returning them to physical reality. The building appeared to be in one piece, though damaged, and the ship still hung above them. There was something weird about the surroundings, but he didn't have time to think about that because his attention snapped to the Wraith, who was practically roaring his anger.

'Traitor! Saboteur! You will pay for this!'

Centurion didn't wait to find out how he would pay. He activated his flight unit, while simultaneously broadcasting a call for help on all police frequencies.

He accelerated into the air, but had barely made fifteen metres of altitude before Sylph flashed in front of him, glowing wings of psionic energy keeping her aloft. He aimed his electrical gauntlets at her—

—And, improbably, every capacitor in his suit chose that moment to fail simultaneously, backups included.

He dropped out of the air like a stone. His armour took the brunt of the impact, but a second later Dynamo blasted him with enough voltage to completely overload what defences the armour had left. Consciousness slipped away. He hoped he had at least got his emergency broadcast away in time.

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Fennec staggered out of the crashed shuttle. Serval and Thumper were already out, and Fallen Star was helping Photon. Fennec saw the *Pittsburgh* accelerating for orbit. He had already seen it pick up a group of passengers who include at least one known criminal, Dynamo.

'Any crash that you can walk away from,' Photon was saying. Fennec cut him short.

'There's a man down, over there!'

Serval began running towards the armoured man lying on the ground. ‘He’s alive,’ he said, his life sense confirming it before he reached the man. At his words, Fallen Star dropped Photon and sprinted past him, reaching the armoured man as he began to rise to his knees.

‘Stay down, you’re under arrest,’ she said.

‘It’s ok, he’s an undercover Special Police officer,’ said Fennec.

Centurion looked at Fennec in astonishment. ‘This operation was top secret. Only me and Chief Kadnez knew about it. So how could you—?’

‘I didn’t for sure. Thanks for confirming it.’ Fennec turned to the others. ‘There was a Special Police emergency broadcast just as we crashed, and the criminals left this man behind for a reason,’ he explained, as if his deduction should have been obvious.

‘Explain this mystery then,’ said Thumper. ‘I’m not getting any communications signals. I mean, from any source. It’s as if we’re the only people still on the planet.’

‘And explain this,’ said Serval. ‘We’re in the West Coast desert, but there are redwood trees over there.’

‘I ... don’t know,’ said Fennec, reluctantly. Adding: ‘Yet.’

Before they could do anything else, the characteristic white glow of a Special Police Watchstation teleport beam appeared beside them.

‘This will be my backup,’ said Centurion. ‘We should get some answers.’

Four men had teleported down. The one with a round metal shield strapped to his arm spoke.

‘I’m Major Democracy and this is Strikeforce. What has been going on here?’

To be continued ...