

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter 29: New Beginning

- ❖ 18 May 1988.
- ❖ A time-displaced building north of Los Angeles.
- ❖ Strikeforce team meeting.

‘What are we going to do with ten members of Strikeforce?’

The question came from Major Democracy, who seemed to have elected himself spokesman for the original four Strikeforce members. They were currently sitting around a conference table, along with the six newly arrived Special Police officers who had prompted the Major’s question.

Six pairs of eyes darted around uneasily. The last few days had been psychologically hard on all of them. Unlike the original Strikeforce, who had volunteered for their time travel mission and gone into it fully briefed and mentally prepared, these new officers had been brought to the past unexpectedly and unwillingly. Their culture shock was considerable. As was their dismay at finding they could never return to their native 24th century.

The newcomers had reacted in different ways. Centurion and Thumper had immersed themselves in work, repairing the fabric of the 24th-century building that had travelled through time with them. This had required considerable excavation work in order to reinforce foundations that had materialised in the same physical space as a chunk of 20th-century bedrock. Modelling the construction requirements had been trivial for the 24th-century scientists, and Centurion’s powered armour gave him the raw strength to do the manual work. After intensive effort, aided by the varied powers of his fellow officers, Centurion had pronounced the building safe to inhabit, which is why they were now in its spacious conference room rather than the more familiar command deck of the Strikeforce space station.

Fennec, equally workaholic, had spent his time on the space station, explaining to Strikeforce why they shouldn’t have allowed their Computer to develop its own personality, and furthermore that their case files were virtually non-existent and their entire security protocol was a joke. Strikeforce had listened and agreed and largely ignored him.

Photon had immersed himself in news media, attempting to learn as much as he could about the 20th century. From cryptic comments he was making, he seemed to see this as an opportunity to use his advanced knowledge to amass a fortune and retire. Major Democracy couldn’t understand how a police officer could be so irresponsible. He felt he was going to have a hard time working with Photon.

The Major and his teammates had done their best to acclimatise the newcomers to their new condition, stressing how important it had been for Strikeforce to set up ‘civilian’ identities for themselves so they could live some semblance of a normal life. Fallen Star and Serval seemed to take this most to heart, each of them getting out on the streets of Los Angeles and seeing how people lived and behaved in this century. Unfortunately, they were the two newcomers least equipped to blend into civilian life: Fallen Star was well over seven feet tall and Serval was a two-legged cat.

So, finally, here they were: ten mismatched exiles from the future meeting in an anachronistic mansion formerly owned by a villain. And hence the Major’s question.

'I have some work still to do on the power systems,' said Centurion, 'And I need to address comms and security—'

'Lots of security,' Fennec interjected.

'But this mansion is just about inhabitable.'

'It will look better when we get the carpets in,' said Electron.

'And,' Centurion patiently continued through the interruptions, 'It gives us a lot more space than your Watchstation, so there won't be any problem living here.'

'As we tried to explain,' said the Major, 'it's important to make an actual real life here—'

'I have a real life, and it's not here,' said Centurion matter-of-factly.

'Of course we will join your—well, "Strikeforce" is as good a name as any—because chew knows this century needs some proper law and order in it,' said Fennec. 'But we need a long discussion about security proto—'

'Yes, let's do that some other day,' said Nightflyer hastily.

'Here's one less thing for you to worry about,' said Thumper. 'I don't plan on joining your little club. I'm an engineer, not a police officer. You don't need another engineer, you've got Centurion. So I'm going to find my own place in this century, whatever that is.'

'That's your prerogative,' said the Major. 'Just keep in touch, and remember that you've got a group of friends here if you ever need to talk to someone from your own century.' The major was still unhappy about former teammate Black Swan dropping out of sight, and he didn't want to lose anyone else.

Thumper nodded, but said nothing else.

Unexpectedly, Avatar spoke up next. 'You don't need to worry about me, either. I'm leaving Strikeforce.'

'What?' exclaimed several voices.

'I have ... personal matters to attend to.'

'A leave of absence, then, but you'll come back?' said the Major hopefully.

'I don't know. I must confer with the Supreme Sorcerer, and what I learn may make it impossible for me to return.'

He took the communicator bracelet off his wrist, and to the Major's dismay laid it on the table.

'Farewell.'

Before anyone could respond, he left the room and flew off.

'I have a bad feeling about that,' said Nightflyer.

'Well this simplifies matters,' said Fennec. 'The question is now what are we going to do with eight members of Strikeforce?'

'Fennec!' snapped Electron, irked that his friend's leaving should be dismissed so cavalierly.

'What?' asked Fennec. 'It's a fair observation.'

'Wait,' said Serval, 'Did he say Supreme Sorcerer?'

'The Council of Science ruled that magic doesn't exist,' said Fennec.

'We have plenty of evidence that it does, unfortunately,' said the Major.

Nightflyer added, 'And plenty more evidence that the Council of Science was full of bull—'

'I am always open to evaluating new evidence,' said Fennec.

'Great,' said Electron, 'But can we also do that another day? We still need to decide how this is going to work.'

'It seems obvious,' said Fennec. 'It will work as it always has. Strikeforce will continue to respond to trouble and fight criminals—'

'Save people,' said the Major, firmly.

'And save people, naturally. The difference is that now there are more of you—us. We have a bigger team to field when the crisis requires it, but the demand on individual officers' time for lesser incidents will be less as we spread the missions among us, allowing you to devote more time to civilian lives—which is a very good idea, by the way. What more is there to decide?'

Put matter-of-factly like that, it did all seem self-evident. There was general agreement that this all made sense and there was nothing more to say.

‘Good,’ said Fennec. ‘So if we can move on to security protocols...’

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Fennec was on the station’s command deck again, deep into a psychological probe of the Computer. Photon sat with him, not because he had any useful knowledge of or even interest in computers but because he enjoyed watching Fennec’s frustration.

‘Restate core programming,’ Fennec said again.

‘Working ... core programming: one, preserve human life; two, assist Strikeforce; three, oh look is that a tonfa in your pocket or are you just pl—’

‘Abort response,’ Fennec snapped.

‘Confirmed, little buddy?’

‘Did you teach it to say that?’ asked Fennec, turning on Photon suspiciously. His fellow officer held up his hands innocently.

‘That’s a negative, little buddy!’

‘Computer, reinstate directive to address all officers, all Strikeforce members I mean, by official code names.’

‘Confirmed, Fen ... Wick.’

‘Have you tried turning it off and on again?’ asked Photon helpfully.

Fennec glared at a monitor screen. ‘It would be easier to wipe the core neural net and rebuild it.’

‘Eek,’ said the Computer.

‘This is fun, Fen, but I have a civilian job to get to,’ said Photon, rising.

‘Really? What did you settle on?’ asked Fennec, surreptitiously opening Photon’s personnel file so he could update it.

‘I have an appointment at a city newspaper, the Los Angeles Globe they call it. I was a photographer before I got my powers and joined the SP, and I think the skills will be transferrable despite the primitive technology they have here. Did you know they still use physical film developed chemically?’

‘And you’ll be using the name John Brighter?’

‘That’s my real name. Don’t tell anyone!’

Fennec ignored this and made a note in the file.

‘Good luck, Photon.’

Photon sensed that the detective meant it, so he nodded and smiled. Fennec was hard to get on with, and easy to wind up, but he still had a heart with everybody’s best interests in it.

‘Information: incoming teleport,’ announced the Computer. The recessed teleport booth shimmered and two people materialised, Nightflyer and a young woman they didn’t recognise. Fennec was instantly on his feet, though his intuition wasn’t giving him any danger signals.

‘Who is this?’ he demanded.

‘This is Astra. Astra, Fennec and Photon.’

‘Hello,’ she said.

‘24th century?’ asked Fennec suspiciously. Strikeforce hadn’t mentioned any extra members hidden away.

‘Who, me? No, no, I’m from now. 1971. I mean, I was born in 1971.’

Fennec gave Nightflyer an inquisitive look.

‘She’s one of us,’ Nightflyer explained. ‘I mean, one of the team.’

‘I’m not really one of the team,’ she said hurriedly.

‘She’s helped us on several occasions,’ explained Nightflyer.

Fennec’s eyes went to her wrist. ‘You’ve been handing out police equipment to civilians?’ he asked.

‘She has a communicator and full teleport privileges,’ said Nightflyer firmly.

Fennec sighed. ‘Computer, open a new level in the security hierarchy, “Associate Members”.’
‘Confirmed.’

‘I don’t think he likes me,’ whispered Astra to Nightflyer.

‘He also has super-human hearing,’ he whispered back.

‘Oh!’ Astra went bright red and backed towards the teleport platform. ‘I—I just remembered something I had to do—’

The Computer teleported her down before she even asked.

‘Be nice, Fennec,’ said Nightflyer.

‘I will be nice, but you can’t just spring these things on me,’ Fennec grumbled. ‘Is there anyone else you’ve got hidden away?’

‘Ah ... has anyone mentioned Carla yet?’

‘Information: Carla is my friend!’ interjected the Computer in a chirpy tone.

Fennec rolled his eyes heavenwards.

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In the mansion, Centurion and Electron were working on the power systems. Electron had watched Centurion tune the fusion power plant, an operation that was well above Electron’s level of ability, but they were now testing and calibrating the beamed power relays in each room, something he was much more confident about doing.

‘This tech is so far above 20th century, they wouldn’t even believe it,’ said Electron, conversationally. Centurion grunted and continued working. Electron tried another tack. ‘It’s so weird working together again like this. We worked together in the alternate future timeline, though of course that was a different version of you so you ... won’t ... remember.’ He tailed off as Centurion put down the tool he was using and fixed him with a hard stare.

‘Alternate future timeline?’

‘Ah, yes. I forgot we hadn’t covered that. We travelled forward to the 24th century and—’

‘Forward time travel? You have a working method of forward time travel? I’ve been spending every waking moment trying to come up with a working theory that will get us back to the future, and now you tell me you have already done it?’ Centurion was shouting by the end of this, and Electron flinched.

‘Centurion, I’m sorry. No, we don’t have a working method. Well, we did, we tried it but it doesn’t work, it—’

‘Just because it doesn’t work for you doesn’t mean that I can’t figure it out!’

‘Ok, ok, I get it. You didn’t sign up for this, you want to go back, I got that. But let me explain—’

‘My family is back in the future!’ snapped Centurion.

Electron was appalled. He hadn’t even considered that possibility. The original Strikeforce members had been carefully selected to have no close ties to the 24th century; no family or other people they would miss or would miss them. That’s why they had adapted so readily to their new century, and started building new lives here. He hadn’t considered that Centurion or any of the others would have people they had left behind.

‘I’m sorry,’ was all he said.

‘No, I’m sorry, Electron. I shouldn’t have lost my temper. And maybe there isn’t a way to recreate the Wraith’s time-travel machine, but I think I have the elements I need, I have the space station with a graviton flywheel and a teleport beam, and I think I understand the theory, I just need to work out the detail. Don’t you realise why I’ve been fixing up this house? It’s so anyone who wants to stay here has a headquarters when I use your space station to go back to the future. And now you tell me you already did it. How?’

Electron let out a long breath.

'I can't explain how, but I can introduce you to the person who can. I think it's time you met Carla Zod.'

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Carla was centre of attention on the station's command deck as she used a stylus to write a complex series of equations on the largest monitor screen. Of the four people with her, she had long since lost Electron and Fennec, but Centurion and Thumper were just about keeping up with her.

'And that,' she finished, 'Is why we call it "Rubber Band Time Travel". Actually I think Avatar came up with that name. Any questions?'

There was a lengthy silence while the scientists digested what they had been shown. Eventually, Centurion spoke.

'No, I see it now. For practical purposes we are stuck here.'

'I have a question,' Thumper said. 'How did you—and sorry, but your science is four centuries behind ours—how did *you* solve that?'

Carla shrugged. 'My father did some of the groundwork. And I had the Computer's help.'

'Confirmed,' said the Computer, happily.

'Nevertheless, you've got a partial solution to a problem that it seems nobody in our own century could solve at all. Unless the Wraith has.'

'Wait,' said Fennec, suddenly giving the discussion his full attention. 'Is the Wraith accidentally stuck here too?'

'That's a bit irrelevant right now, Fennec,' said Electron.

'So from what we know, Karl Zod in 2350 solved travel to the past but not the future,' said Fennec, ignoring Electron. 'The Wraith may have independently solved it, but I don't think he did. He stole Zod's work. We know his agents tried it once, before you were sent back in time. He must have tried again and succeeded at a later date. So he doesn't know how time travel works, not really, he's piggybacking on Zod's theory.'

'I can vouch for his scientific credentials,' said Centurion. 'He may not have devised the time machine plans I was following but he certainly understood them. Better than I did at the time.'

'Following plans is an order of magnitude away from understanding the theory. If he's working with Zod's theory, he may not fully understand it and may not know it is not reversible. That hypothesis makes his actions so much more understandable. There's a *lot* he could do to change history here to benefit himself in the future, but that only works if he can travel forwards again. There is no logical reason for him to travel back unless he believed he could return.'

'He probably didn't mean to strand himself here any more than we did. But now he's here, he's a clear and present danger to this century. He has an army of super-villains working for him, he has advanced scientific knowledge, and an armed space ship. We need to make it our priority to find him and stop him. Any suggestions?'

Silence greeted this.

'I think we're getting off the subject, Fennec,' said Centurion finally. 'Yes, you're right that we need to stop the Wraith, but first we need to solve time travel.'

'That's just you being selfish,' Fennec began.

'Fennec, you're out of line,' Electron snapped. He rarely lost his temper, but ever since Fennec had arrived on the scene the detective's arrogance and take-charge attitude had really been grating on him. He made a decision that if their planned floating duty rota worked, he would make sure he never got assigned to the same team as Fennec.

Thumper chose that moment to ask Carla about an obscure point in her mathematics. Gratefully, she launched into an explanation which Centurion soon joined in with. Fennec silently moved to the teleport booth and left the command deck. Electron heaved a sigh of relief.

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Electron was in the mansion, wiring a television receiver in a room he had decided would be an off-duty lounge, when Nightflyer strolled in.

'I've been thinking about this building,' Nightflyer said without preamble. 'Because we've obviously got to keep it, there are too many of us for the station to house.'

'Of course, that's why some of us have been putting so much work into it,' said Electron testily, waving a handful of wires at Nightflyer.

'Great, you've all been working real hard. But you've been a bit narrow-focussed. Do you know, for example, what's over that ridge?'

Electron realised that he had no idea, and it must have shown on his face because Nightflyer laughed.

'That's because you're all teleporting straight here. You should try using roads sometimes. I've been running around the neighbourhood. We're pretty isolated, obviously there are trees all around screening us, and the road is hidden over that ridge. You can get here from the road through some big iron gates. The ones by the other house.'

'Other house?' said Electron, suddenly concerned.

'Big place, another mansion, but nothing like this one. I think they call it gothic style. Old and spooky looking. Big gates onto the road. Big fence all round its land. Runs round there ... there ... through the woods there ...'

Nightflyer was sweeping his arm to illustrate the line of the fence. Electron gulped.

'That's all round us!'

'Uh-huh. We're on somebody else's private land,' said Nightflyer.

'Oh. That's ... not good.'

'What do you think we should do?'

'Well,' Electron faltered. 'The obvious thing.' He stopped again. And then it suddenly became obvious. 'We have to go and tell them we're here.'

'Exactly. Convince them that they want a super-heroes' headquarters in their back yard. Before they notice the strange lights and call the cops.'

'So ... we should tell the Major?'

'Are you kidding? Suit up, we'll just go over there now, you and me.'

'Oh,' said Electron faintly.

To be continued ...

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Epilogue

The interior of the cave was warm, dry, brightly lit, even homely, furnished with the comforts and bric-a-brac of a dozen centuries and a hundred cultures. It was not what one would expect, coming in from the bleak, snow-swept Tibetan plateau that surrounded it. But this was no ordinary cave. This was the sanctuary of Earth's Supreme Sorcerer.

Avatar cared nothing for the comfort or the furnishings. He cared even less for the magical wards and defences at the mouth of the cave. Defences specifically designed to deter demons such as he. Avatar strode past them as if they were not there.

He stopped, however, when the Sorcerer confronted him directly.

It was an incongruous meeting. Avatar: tall, muscled, jackal-headed, ebony skin and glowing red eyes, pentagram on his chest pulsing with silver light. The Sorcerer: small, frail, ancient skin and wispy white hair.

'Karouvicine,' the Sorcerer said, and Avatar flinched at the power of his true name on the lips of Earth's most powerful magic user.

'Sorcerer,' he said. 'Months ago, you took my magic from me. I am here to take it back.'

'You know why I did it.'

It may have been a statement or may have been a question, but Avatar didn't bother replying.

'You have never had truly free will, Karouvicine,' the Sorcerer continued. 'Your whole existence has been planned, orchestrated by Karoona. He could not cross the barrier between his dimension and our own, but he could push a small fraction of his power through, and he allowed Atlantean sorcerers to capture that fraction in an amulet. Sufficient power to weaken the barrier and allow him through in his full glory, if that power were unleashed. But the Atlanteans knew enough to keep the power leashed, and so for millennia Karoona was thwarted. And so he caused your summoning, he allowed you to hold the amulet that you naïvely thought gave you free will, and then he infused you with the power of that amulet so that you would unleash it in his service. Your magic is the bridgehead he will use to enter this reality. Ten percent of his infinite power, concentrated in this body that men call a demon.' He touched Avatar's chest, in the centre of the silver pentagram. 'They do not know what a true demon is.'

'But they will,' said Avatar.

'You understand, then, why I took your magic?' asked the Sorcerer again.

'I understood that, finally,' said Avatar. 'You thought you were preserving the Earth from the power of Karoona.'

'That is why my Office was created, twelve millennia ago.'

'Your Office has failed. You are the last Supreme Sorcerer, and you cannot stop Karoona from taking this reality.'

'You are half correct. I cannot stop Karoona,' said the Sorcerer.

'You cannot even stop me from taking my magic back from you.'

'I understood that, finally.' The Sorcerer bowed his head and smiled sadly. 'Do what you must.' Avatar's hands reached for the only man on Earth who might have stopped him.

Definitely to be continued ...