

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter 30: By Hook Or By Crook

- ❖ 20 May 1988.
- ❖ Near the new Strikeforce headquarters, north of Los Angeles.
- ❖ Another Strikeforce plan is about to go wrong.

Nightflyer and Electron, in full costume, stood outside an imposing gothic mansion.

‘There isn’t an easy way to do this,’ said Electron.

‘When is there ever an easy way for us?’ his companion responded. ‘But this is simple. We knock on the door, tell them we’re superheroes who have accidentally dropped a 24th-century building back through time and onto their land, and do they mind if we continue to use it as a headquarters?’

‘Are you listening to how that sounds?’

‘Stop being so negative. What can possibly go wrong?’

Electron had lost track of how many times Nightflyer had said that just before all hell broke loose, but he just shrugged and grasped that large, brass doorknocker cast into the shape of a lion’s head.

‘Go on,’ urged Nightflyer.

Electron thumped the knocker home three times. Booms resounded through the house.

‘Now we run away,’ said Nightflyer. ‘I’m kidding!’ he said in response to Electron’s look.

A minute passed, then the door opened with a loud, grinding creak.

The man who faced them appeared as old and dilapidated as the house did. A large man, possibly in his sixties they thought, with the hint of a once-powerful physique and a misshapen nose that spoke of a career in boxing. He was dressed in what may have passed as a butler’s uniform in its better days.

‘Y-e-e-s-s?’ he asked, drawing out the word in a voice that creaked as badly as the door. He seemed unperturbed by the sight of their costumes. Electron wasn’t sure whether to take this as a good sign or not.

‘Are you the owner of this property?’ asked Electron, uncertainly.

‘You will want the Master. He does not accept visitors, but he will see *you*.’

There was a particular emphasis on *you* that Electron didn’t like. Without another word, the imposing butler beckoned them into the interior. He shut the door behind them and indicated they should follow him down the gloomy, wood-panelled hall.

‘He seemed remarkably unconcerned by our costumes,’ murmured Nightflyer.

‘He’s probably seen us on the TV,’ said Electron. ‘Wow ... look at that!’

He was indicating a large, fading, framed picture on the wall. It appeared to be a movie poster, a painting showing a costumed man flying over a city scene.

Nightflyer shrugged, unimpressed. ‘The Adventures of Rick Rocket,’ he read. ‘Never heard of it.’

‘Never heard of it? This is iconic! Only fragments of the movie survive in our century, but I caught a showing in a theatre here. It’s a classic of the early heroic genre! There were a whole series of them, but this was the first one, before Rick met his kid sidekick Bruiser!’

‘Kid sidekick?’ snorted Nightflyer, rolling his eyes. But Electron was genuinely excited at finding what he believed might be an original poster from the 1936 movie release. He had been a fan of early

heroic fiction long before he gained his powers and joined the Special Police, and to him this movie was genuinely iconic.

The butler had ignored their conversation and moved on to a door at the end of the hall. They hurried to catch him up.

‘Visitors, sir,’ he creaked.

‘And you let them in?’ asked someone inside the room, a hint of alarm in his voice.

Electron and Nightflyer stepped into the doorway to see the sole occupant of a large and comfortable study. He was an elderly man, probably a few years older than his butler, and appeared small and frail in comparison, wrapped in a large, baggy cardigan. On seeing them he rose suddenly from his high-backed chair, showing more suppleness than his elderly frame suggested, and dropped the book he had been reading.

‘Oh, my,’ he said. ‘Now I see why you ... but I don’t recognise you two ...’ His voice was old but firm, and his gaze clear and penetrating.

‘We are Strikeforce,’ said Electron, and at the blank look elaborated, ‘Superheroes? You may have seen us on TV?’

‘I don’t allow television in the house,’ said the man, indicating the cluttered room with a sweep of his arm. ‘Nor people, generally. But I make an exception for ... people like you, even though I don’t know you ...’

‘Nightflyer, and this is Electron.’

‘Delighted, delighted. And I am Hugh Howard. Please sit. Birch, tea for our guests.’

As the butler left, they sat, and Electron looked around at the clutter in the room. His eyes fell on a pair of small golden figurines in a glass cabinet.

‘Those are Academy Awards ... you’re *the* Hugh Howard!’

‘Yes, I suppose I am. I’m afraid few people would remember that name these days. Or should I say, I’m glad? I like my solitude.’

‘Hugh Howard was a movie producer in the 1930s,’ Electron explained to a puzzled Nightflyer. ‘He created the Rick Rocket movies!’

‘Technically my uncle was the creator. I started out in Hollywood as a lowly stunt man, I only took over the producer’s chair when my uncle was killed by Nazi spies in the war. But I worked on all of the Rick Rocket movies before I retired in the ’40s. Those were good days ...’ the old man’s voice tailed away wistfully.

‘Rick Rocket in the movies was a superhero,’ said Electron, warming to the subject. ‘And nobody knew his real identity, of course. But there’s more than that, he was a real actual superhero, one of the first in the world. And a hero of the world war. But nobody ever knew his identity in real life either, though several movie actors were linked with the part.’ He suddenly turned to the old man. ‘But *you* knew it, Mr Howard!’

I can’t deny that,’ Howard replied. ‘But I’m not going to reveal it, even now,’ he said with a twinkle in his eye.

‘Now we see why you and your butler weren’t put off by our costumes. This must be old hat to you after working with Rick Rocket,’ said Electron.

Nightflyer fidgeted. Partly because he wished Electron would stop the hero-worship and get to the point, but partly because his intuition, the sixth-sense that had kept him and his team alive on numerous occasions, was telling him he ought to be fidgety. Something was about to happen. He just wasn’t quite sure what.

‘Old hat, I guess so,’ Howard said. ‘It’s a long time since I had anything to do with people like you. The world hasn’t seen Rick Rocket for over forty years. Kids have probably forgotten him now.’

‘Pretty much, I think,’ said Electron regretfully. ‘But there are new heroes. And of course, new super-villains for us to—’

His sentence was cut off by a shattering of glass as, in one of those weird coincidences that tended to dog Strikeforce, a group of super-villains chose that moment to crash through the window.

Even by the standard of villain Strikeforce normally tangled with, this was an outlandish group. At their head was a man in nothing less than a full theatrical pirate costume, complete with a thigh boots, a crimson frock coat, and a huge floppy hat decorated with a feather. A cutlass hung at this side, but in each hand he held a wicked-looking shining steel hook that looked no less dangerous than a sword.

Flanking him were two men in toned-down versions of the same period costume, with spotted bandanas in place of the hat, and wielding cudgels rather than hooks.

‘Avast, lubbers!’ the leader shouted. ‘Show us yer valuables or ye’ll have a taste o’ me hooks!’

‘What the hell?’ said Nightflyer, coming to his feet. But despite the warning from his intuition, the intruders’ appearance was so ludicrous that he found it hard to take the danger seriously. Thus, when the ‘pirate’ discharged a bolt of electricity from one of his hooks, he was slow to dodge and took the blast full on. He reeled back, momentarily stunned.

‘Let that be a warning to ye all!’ blustered the pirate.

Electron was immune to the effects of electricity and was fairly confident he could take down the villain and his sidekicks, but didn’t want to risk a fight in the cramped room where the old man could easily be injured by a stray bolt. He decided to play along until Howard was out of harm’s way.

‘Take it easy,’ he said, raising his hands in surrender. ‘We don’t want to—’

At that moment, Birch shuffled into the room with the tea. On seeing the intruders, he croaked out ‘Captain Hook,’ and with a speed that belied his age he hurled a silver tray, china cups and all, straight at the pirate.

The pirate—‘Captain Hook’, evidently, if a little unoriginally—swept the missile aside with one of his hooks and a clatter of metal against metal.

‘Arr, matey, and who might you—’

Howard was now on his feet and faced the pirate, no trace of fear in his face.

‘Hook! Impossible! You would be an old man!’

‘Arr, that would be me granddaddy, who—’

Electron was already feeling the situation slipping rapidly away from him, when Nightflyer, having shaken off the stun, launched himself across the room and tackled Hook to the floor.

‘Arr, will ye let me finish me sentences?’ shouted Hook, battering Nightflyer on the side of his head with both of his hooks.

Electron saw that Birch had moved to stand next to his master, fists raised in a boxing stance. Somehow confident that the two old men could take care of themselves, he turned to the two pirate sidekicks who were lifting their cudgels to smash Nightflyer away from their leader. With a simple telekinetic pull, he disarmed one thug and used the cudgel to efficiently knock out the other. At the same time, he noted with satisfaction that Birch had flattened the disarmed thug with a hard left jab.

Nightflyer was getting to his feet, hauling up a sorry looking Hook who had evidently fared poorly in their brawl. Both of his hooks were on the floor and Nightflyer kicked them away.

‘Uncle!’ shouted Hook, raising a free arm to shield his face. The pirate accent had mysteriously vanished.

‘That means he doesn’t want you to hit him again,’ said Howard helpfully. Nightflyer shrugged and dropped the pirate in a heap on the floor.

‘That may have been the easiest fight we’ve ever had,’ he remarked. He wasn’t even breathing hard.

‘They were certainly fighting out of their league,’ said Electron. ‘No powers even, just housebreakers with costumes and a gimmick.’

Birch hauled Hook to his feet again and turned him to face Howard. ‘Talk,’ he grated out.

‘What? Confess? I just heard, there’s a rich old guy, no security, loot just there for the taking. I thought it would be a hoot to knock over the place in grandpa’s old super-villain costume.’

‘That’s the only reason?’ Howard demanded.

‘Sure ... what more do you want me to say?’

Birch dropped the thief in disgust.

‘You’ll have to call the police,’ said Electron.

‘I hate the intrusion. Besides, I don’t have a telephone.’

‘Of course you don’t,’ Nightflyer muttered, and raised his communicator. ‘Computer, put in a call to James Lang and tell him we have some villains here to be picked up.’

‘Confirmed.’

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Later, after officer Lang and sergeant Thursday had taken statements from Howard and Birch and led the three criminals into custody, Electron and Nightflyer sat down with Howard again and explained their situation, being completely open about how their building had arrived accidentally on his property, and how they wished to use it as a headquarters. If he disbelieved any of their crazy story, he didn’t show it.

‘As far as I’m concerned, you’re welcome to the land. I have more than I need. I rarely leave the house these days anyway. Just keep to your side of the ridge and you’ll be fine.’

‘I can’t promise there won’t be danger,’ Electron said. ‘We have enemies, and some of them know where to find us.’

‘Son, from what I saw today I’m sure you can handle any danger. And don’t have any worries on my behalf, I’ve lived too long to be frightened by a super-villain fight in my back yard.’

‘So I see,’ said Nightflyer.

‘Thank you, Mr. Howard,’ said Electron, pumping the man’s hand. ‘And let me say again it’s been an honour to—’

‘Come on, Electron, you’re embarrassing the man.’

Outside, Electron said, ‘He must have some incredible stories! Can you imagine, all these years later and still nobody knows who Rick Rocket really was? I wonder if that mystery will ever be solved?’

Nightflyer gave him a sideways look. ‘You don’t know?’

‘No, I told you, it’s always been a secret.’

‘Seriously? You don’t know?’

Electron looked annoyed. ‘Are you being deliberately dense?’ he asked.

Nightflyer smiled to himself. ‘Perhaps better that it remains a secret, then. Computer, teleport us up.’

Hugh Howard and Birch watched through a window as the two heroes vanished from his front lawn.

‘I think the world is in safe hands again,’ Howard said.

‘Y-e-e-s-s,’ said Birch doubtfully.

Hugh Howard only smiled.

Epilogue

In a provincial town square in Germany, the criminal known as Hellfire clicked his fingers and a parked car erupted into flames. Several historic buildings were already burning and people were running screaming in all directions.

Hellfire laughed. He would be pocketing a tidy sum from a crooked property developer for this little ‘re-zoning’ exercise, but that wasn’t what delighted him. He simply revelled in the destruction. Another muttered spell and another click of the fingers, and a gout of flame burst out of the ovens of the town’s bakery.

A sleek, black shape dropped out of the sky in front of him.

‘Avatar! I have bested you before, demon. Run away now and I may let you live.’

'I am not what I was before,' Avatar replied, his eyes flashing red.

Hellfire was a veteran sorcerer who had dealt with a multitude of supernatural entities in his long career, and Avatar's demonic nature didn't impress him. He whispered a binding spell and focussed his entire will behind bands of flame that he hurled against Avatar. It was his most powerful spell, much deeper magic than the parlour tricks he used for his petty arson attacks.

Avatar made the slightest gesture and the flames were shredded as if by hurricane winds.

Hellfire's eyes opened wide in sudden fear.

Avatar stepped forward. Hellfire stumbled back a step, holding up his arms in a warding gesture.

'What do you want?' he asked pitifully.

'Everything you have,' said Avatar. His hands reached for the sorcerer.

To be continued ...