

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter Eight: Interludes

- ❖ Strikeforce are beginning to be accepted by the people of this century.
- ❖ They have made peace with the Defense League and the Department of Intelligence and Counter-Espionage.
- ❖ Winning over the general public has been harder to accomplish.

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- ❖ Casey's Bar, Los Angeles.
- ❖ 10 December 1987.

Casey's bar was a favourite hang-out for the off-duty officers of Precinct 13. After much cajoling Sergeant Joe Thursday had convinced his new partner, James Lang, to come for a beer when his shift ended. Thursday was currently propping up the bar next to an old friend, officer Pete Gibson, and watching Lang play pool. Lang had claimed to have no idea how the game was played, but Joe was starting to suspect that was part of a hustle and was wishing he had put some money down on him. A chorus of catcalls accompanied Lang smoothly sinking his final ball for a clean win over his opponent.

Lang had only been with the LAPD for a month, and his arrest record was already the highest in the department. Joe couldn't fault his devotion to duty, but Lang typically kept to himself, never talked about his home life, and Joe had no idea what he usually did after his shift ended. Joe thought that was an unhealthy attitude, and was a firm believer in partners being friends. When you relied on a guy to have your back, you wanted to know what the guy was really like. So Joe considered it was a major victory to get Lang down to Casey's.

'So what's it like working with the boy wonder?' asked Gibson.

'He's good. Damn good. He can out-sprint me on my best day without breaking a sweat. And have you seen him box? But ... still ... I don't know. His attitude's all wrong. It's like the people aren't important to him. Just the job. You know what I mean? Not bad ... just ... cold'

They watched Lang line up to break. The cue ball hit the pack, scattering it. Five balls found their way into pockets. Shouts of surprise, disbelief, and consternation broke out among the spectators.

'Damn! Lang, I ain't never betting against you again!' somebody shouted in mock disgust.

Lang was unperturbed, and coolly chalked his cue.

'How do you do that?' somebody called out.

'Precision,' said Lang. 'But that's nothing, you should see my reactions.'

Joe shook his head. It didn't sound like a boast, just a statement of fact, delivered in the exact matter-of-fact tone Lang used to deliver evidence in a court appearance. Joe just couldn't understand the guy.

As Lang leaned down to line up another shot, Joe overheard two more cops at the bar.

'You heard Strikeforce were in action, up in Frisco the other day?'

'Yeah. Got messy. Some super villain got killed, I heard.'

A loud clunk announced a bad stroke from Lang. The cue ball rolled into a pocket.

'Ohh, bad one, Lang,' called out a spectator derisively.

'No so perfect after all, huh Lang?' called another. The ribbing was mostly good natured, but Joe picked up a darker undercurrent. Lang's attitude rubbed a lot of people up the wrong way. He and his partner would have to work on that.

Joe noticed Lang's face. He was troubled, almost angry about something. About missing the shot? Or ...?

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❖ East Los Angeles.

Nightflyer crouched on a rooftop, surveying the length of the street. Night had fallen across Los Angeles and the shops in this inner-city district were mostly dark behind their security shutters. The sole exception was a liquor store in the middle of the block, which advertised its late night opening hours in gaudy neon. Nightflyer had been on what Scorpio called a 'patrol', but Nightflyer just called a chance to blow off some steam. Strikeforce hadn't been in action as a unit since the Defense League encounter, and Nightflyer thought they needed to be getting on top of things. Top of his to-do list was to discover where the Anarchists were keeping Professor Zod. The problem was, he didn't have a clue where to begin looking. Spending an evening sprinting across city rooftops didn't bring him any closer to solving the problem, but the physical activity made him feel better.

His high-speed circuit of the district had brought him to this rooftop, where his uncanny intuitive ability had caused him to pause. Something was about to happen. He just wasn't sure what.

'Hello, Nightflyer!'

So intently had Nightflyer been focused on the street below that the voice behind him almost made him jump out of his skin. He took a deep breath before turning. His team-mate Avatar hovered behind and a little above Nightflyer, his jet-black form appearing almost like a hole in the reflected streetlights.

'Avatar. What are you doing here?'

'Looking for you. I was bored so I had the Computer track your communicator.'

'Gee, thanks Computer.'

'Acknowledged,' said the Computer via his communicator. Nightflyer wasn't sure whether the monotone sounded smug or it was his imagination. Sometimes ...

'So what's up?' Avatar wanted to know.

'Just ... making sure the streets are safe.'

Avatar floated silently to the rooftop behind his team-mate. His wolf-like teeth bared in a grin.

'You sound like Scorpio.'

'Gee, thanks,' muttered Nightflyer, 'Compare me with that ... that ...'

'You're still bothered about that fight in San Francisco,' Avatar stated, showing a rare empathy. The nuances of human moods usually passed him by. 'That man you killed, Greywolf.'

'I didn't kill him!' Nightflyer snapped, 'It was Scorpio!'

'Sure it was,' said the demon smoothly. Then, again showing an unusual insight, he added, 'But you don't really think that, do you?'

'No,' said Nightflyer after a moment. 'Even after Scorpio blasted Greywolf, I had an instant to react. I'm fast enough. I could have twisted in mid-leap, not landed on him, or landed with less force ...'

Avatar shrugged. 'We hold back as much as we can, but with our powers accidents are going to happen. Humans are fragile. We can only do our best.'

It was rare for Avatar to talk like this. Nightflyer wondered if there was something else on the demon's mind that was putting him in a reflective mood. Before he could ask, however, their conversation was interrupted by loud shouts and a gunshot from down the block. Their eyes were drawn instantly to the liquor store.

'Chew it, I knew something would happen,' Nightflyer cursed, launching himself off the roof. 'I'm too late to save somebody ...'

'It's not my fault!' said Avatar, flying after his comrade.

Two men were running from the store. Only teenagers, they were running in blind panic. One of them carried a pistol, and the other was screaming at him.

'Dude, you didn't have to shoot the guy!'

'Shut your mouth, you agreed to come along tonight!'

'For kicks, not to—what the hell is that?'

Surprisingly, it was not Nightflyer or Avatar he was referring to. The heroes were still half a block away from the scene. The figure the two kids were recoiling from was something very different. A nightmare of rotting, skeletal flesh swathed in tattered rags, it floated insubstantially through the store front, moving inexorably towards them.

'I am the Touch of Death,' it whispered. The voice struck fear into their hearts, rooting them to the spot. Though only a whisper, the voice somehow carried down the street. Nightflyer had faced foes powerful enough to blast him to atoms, without flinching, yet the eerie quality of that whisper almost made him stumble to a halt. Pulling himself together, he accelerated towards the figure.

'Get away from them' he yelled. But despite his speed, he was too late to interfere as the ghastly form stretched out its arms, plunging one hand into the chest of each youth.

'Murderers burn at my touch,' it intoned in that chilling rasp. Instantly, the youth with the gun burst into flames and had time for just one hideous scream before he was reduced to ash. The other youth staggered back from the monster's touch, obviously shaken to his core, but unharmed. The creature turned a baleful eye on him.

'You have done nothing to fear my touch ... yet.'

Avatar had no idea what the creature was, but he recognised a supernatural entity when he saw one. The spectral voice was heavy with magic, but had no effect on the demon. As soon as he was in range, he flung a restraining spell at the creature, but was confounded to see the glowing bands pass harmlessly through its form with no effect.

Nightflyer was a second behind the spell and closed without further hesitation, but his leap also carried him through the insubstantial form. He recovered instantly on landing and pivoted for a further attack. The creature was a mere arm's length away.

'I am the Touch of Death,' it repeated its refrain, 'Murderers burn at my touch.'

A spectral arm reached out.

'Nightflyer, move!' shouted Avatar, and Nightflyer's every instinct told him to comply. But ...

Nightflyer stood his ground as the creature plunged its insubstantial fist into his chest.

Nothing happened.

'You have done nothing to fear my touch.'

With that, the apparition simply melted away, leaving three very shaken people on the street.

'I thought you were ash,' said Avatar, landing next to his friend. 'How were you sure you would be unhurt?'

'I wasn't,' came the surprising reply. 'But I had to know.'

Avatar's wolf-like face didn't lend itself to frowning, but he somehow managed to convey his puzzlement.

'But you have no way of knowing if his ... its ... claims about burning murderers are true. Maybe it's just a demon who likes burning people!'

'Oh,' said Nightflyer, genuinely surprised. 'I never thought of that!'

They turned to the third member of the tableau, the youth who was still staring in shock at the pile of ash that used to be his friend.

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- ❖ Secret Headquarters of the Department of Intelligence and Counter-Espionage (DICE).
- ❖ San Francisco.

Major Harry Eastwood was returning to his office after a long and tedious budget meeting. As he opened the door, the veteran soldier's combat instincts kicked in and he drew his pistol even as he flicked on his office lights. He levelled the pistol at his own office chair ...

... Where the seated Scorpio calmly sat waiting for him.

'What part of "secret base" wasn't clear to you costumed clowns?' grumbled Eastwood, holstering his gun.

'It's secrets I wanted to talk about,' said Scorpio, vacating the chair to let the major sit. 'A few days ago in San Francisco ... I may have killed a man.'

'May have? Did, according to the coroner. Caused me a paperwork nightmare, but the man was an international terrorist, and dealing with them, by any means necessary, is why D.I.C.E. was created.'

'I know. That's why I wanted to talk to you. If one of your agents had killed him, it would have been in the normal discharge of his duties. I was working with you, but not for you, so my action was outside the law ... and that's against everything I believe in. I have no law-enforcement powers in this cent—no law-enforcement powers here, and by rights I should unmask and turn myself into the police.' Scorpio's speech was slow and hesitant, quite different to that of the decisive man of action Eastwood had met some days previously.

'So?' Eastwood prompted, wondering where this was going.

'So, I want to join DICE, effective two weeks ago.'

'So you can kill more men?' Eastwood snorted.

'I assure you, Major, that will never happen again. But as long as it has happened, I would feel happier knowing it was a legal action.'

Eastwood chewed this over. Retroactive justification for the killing? Scorpio had an ... unconventional ... sense of honour. Eastwood couldn't fathom the man's thought processes at all. But there was no doubt in Eastwood's mind that Scorpio, as testified by all of his activity, was fundamentally a good man. And an undeniably valuable asset. Eastwood had considerable leeway in cherry-picking top men from other government agencies, but there was nothing in the DICE charter about recruiting people like Scorpio.

On the other hand, Strikeforce were evidently here to stay, and the question of how to obtain some measure of control over them had been nagging at Eastwood since he had first crossed paths with them. Actually putting Scorpio on the payroll was more control than he could have dreamed of.

The vetting people would have kittens at enrolling a masked vigilante. There was literally no precedent for this.

But Eastwood saw how he could make it work. A grin slowly spread over his face. He stood and held out a hand.

'Welcome to the team, Scorpio.'

Scorpio felt that a weight had been lifted from him. He had still killed a man, and he didn't kid himself that this did anything to atone for that. But he had made a vow to himself that it wouldn't ever happen again, and to keep that vow he had to become a better person. He knew he was good at his job of law enforcement, but he was keenly aware that he needed to adopt new methods and principles to serve

this century he found himself in. This wasn't the end of the personal transformation he had in mind, but it was a good start.

As he shook Eastwood's hand, Scorpio grinned at a sudden thought that struck him: Joe would approve.

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❖ The Mansion of Los Angeles Mayor Stan Kirby.
❖ Beverly Hills.

Bruce Kirby was not having a good night.

It was, he admitted to himself, his own fault. As the son of the wealthy Stan Kirby he had every advantage, every luxury, a child could need. He still lived in his parents' mansion, he drove a classic sports car, he'd had schooling (which he had mostly ignored) at the best private academy in the state, he didn't work for his allowance, and he was pretty much guaranteed a Vice-Presidency in one of his father's business interests when he turned 21 in a couple of years.

Naturally, he had rebelled. Well, what else was he supposed to do? He had fallen in with a gang, 'the Panthers', at the cheap east-side gym he frequented, and was soon showing off, trying to impress them with the super-human strength that some accident of birth had imbued him with. He wasn't Defense League material, not by a long shot, but he was strong enough to bench press his car, and tough enough for baseball bats to crack on his head. Within a few days, he was the gang leader's best friend. At least, he had thought they were friends. If he had actually known he was being groomed to provide the muscle in a crime spree, he would have acted differently. At least, he hoped he would.

It didn't matter now. What mattered was that his 'best friend' had just been incinerated by some kind of fiend from hell, and Bruce was running for his life, pursued by some kind of wolf monster.

His Corvette screeched into his parents' drive, skidded to a halt, and Bruce tumbled out.

'Boo!' said Avatar as he landed on the driveway in front of the youth.

It was too much for Kirby. He wasn't afraid of anything in this world, but this clearly wasn't of this world. He sank to his knees.

'Oh, God, I'm sorry. Please don't fry me!'

'Fry you?' said Avatar, puzzled, 'Why would I fry you? That was the death-touch monster. We're the good guys! He showed his teeth in a reassuring smile which had the opposite of the desired effect. He was still sure that he should have been the one who stayed to hunt for the flash-frying vigilante monster while Nightflyer dealt with this human, but for some reason they'd done it this way.

'I didn't know he had a gun,' Bruce pleaded, 'I swear, I was just along for kicks. I'm truly sorry.'

'Hmm. Repentance. Well, I guess that's good enough.'

Bruce looked up at the monster doubtfully. 'You mean ... you're not going to fry me?'

'Didn't I already explain that?'

'So I'm free to go?'

'No, that's not how it works in the human world. You're going to turn yourself into the police.'

'My father will kill me!'

Avatar's red eyes flashed dangerously.

'I mean—ok, ok, sure, I'll do it.'

'If you don't ... I know where to find you!'

'Yes, yes, I swear!'

With a long searching look, Avatar took to the air and flew back towards the city. That had gone remarkably well, he thought. He raised Nightflyer on the communicator.

'I dealt with the kid. He's going to think twice before doing anything like that again. Any luck with the killer-killer monster thing?'

‘What do you think?’ came Nightflyer’s answer.

‘I think ... no?’ he guessed. ‘I’m coming back. I told you I was the best one to track a mystical entity.’

But despite his claim, there were no clues, mystical or otherwise, to be had at the scene. The death-dealing vigilante would remain a mystery for another day.

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❖ Chinatown, San Francisco.

The shop was tiny, and filled with more cheap souvenirs and curios than it seemed possible to fit into one small room. The teenage girl stood in one of the few available squares of floor space and spun around wildly, not caring that her outstretched arm was sweeping through shelves crammed with merchandise.

Sweeping through, but not touching. Her arm was as insubstantial as a ghost’s.

Finally, she stopped, and swayed giddily.

‘Nope,’ she said dejectedly.

The small Chinese man sitting behind the counter was of indeterminate age. He pulled at his ragged white beard and sniffed.

‘How many times did you spin?’

‘Three. I think. I kind of lost count.’

‘Ha. Some sorceress you are.’

The girl sat down on a convenient box. Her insubstantial form sank into it by a couple of inches but she didn’t seem to notice.

‘It’s not funny, Wang.’

‘Never said it was. The longer you remain in astral form, the more your body will decay. Then it’s the Hell of Disembodied Ghosts. Not funny at all. You need to find your lost body quickly!’

‘But how?’

‘Ha, that’s the question. I have taught you the most powerful location spell I know. And you have a sympathetic connection to your body. Only you can do this.’

‘I’m not ... I’m not a real sorceress. I’m just a kid. I can’t!’

‘You can. Try. Again. Three spins.’

With a sigh the girl stood up. Stretched out her arm. Spun three times ...

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❖ The Strikeforce Space Station.
❖ Geostationary Earth Orbit.

The air of the teleport booth shimmered as Electron teleported up to the station after a day’s work in his civilian identity of Franklin Marks. The control deck was empty.

‘Computer, who’s on the station?’ he asked.

‘The only current occupant is Doctor Carla Zod.’

Electron felt uneasy about the extended periods they had been leaving Carla alone on the station. What had started out as a precaution to keep her safe from the Anarchists had somehow become a permanent arrangement. And as time dragged on, she was an acute reminder that Strikeforce had utterly failed to locate and rescued her kidnapped father. Even the optimistic Electron had to admit to himself that hopes of a rescue were now slim.

‘Where is she?’

‘On the power deck.’

Electron’s unease turned to alarm. The power deck should be off limits! Without wasting time on the stairs, he used his own power to teleport himself straight down.

With the characteristic crackle of his power, he arrived on the power deck, staggering a little under the slightly increased gravity down here at the lowest level of the station. The vast majority of the power deck was occupied by the bulk of the fusion plant and the graviton flywheel. The access-way which circled it was narrow and low-ceilinged.

‘Carla?’ he called.

A thud and a muffled curse drew his attention down to where Carla was halfway inside an access panel. She manoeuvred her way out and smiled at him.

‘Hello, Electron.’

‘What are you doing?’ he asked, trying not to sound suspicious.

‘Oh, the Computer was picking up a minor gravity anomaly,’ she said breezily, ‘And it occurred to me that I could stabilize it by applying a new spin configuration to the embedded force fields. Computer, how’s it reading now?’

‘Graviton flywheel re-stabilized at 100%’

‘Oh.’ Electron didn’t know what else to say. He was a qualified technician with 24th-century training, but he couldn’t have done what Carla had just figured out all by herself on a system that would be invented three hundred and fifty years in her future. Strikeforce’s suspicions were correct: she was a bona fide genius.

‘Look,’ he began awkwardly, ‘We’ve left you here alone on the station too much—’

‘Oh, I love it!’ she beamed.

‘Well ... ok. But it’s not good for you, you need fresh air if nothing else. And something better than the processed food up here. Come down Earth-side and I’ll buy you breakfast.’

She looked at him suspiciously. ‘It’s nearly midnight.’

‘Not in Paris.’

‘Oh ... oh!’ She smiled again.

‘Computer set the beam for Paris, somewhere quiet.’

‘Confirmed.’

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">❖ The capital world of the Star Kingdom of High Ilona.❖ Approximately one thousand light years from Earth. |
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Princess M’Krell of High Ilona sat on the bridge of the Royal Yacht and faced the main screen. On the screen, her father was nearing the end of an interminable speech, re-impressing on her how vital her mission was. In her private thoughts, it was a mission she wished were not happening.

‘And once the wedding ceremonies are complete, my daughter, the alliance with the Boluscans will be sealed for all time, bringing an end to the long Cold War between our empires. I wish you star-speed, and my blessing on your union with the Meg of Bolusca!’

The screen reverted to an image of the world that the Royal Yacht orbited. Her home world. The bridge was silent for a long moment, the hand-picked bridge crew awaiting their orders.

Seated in front of the Princess, and slightly below her as befitted their relative status, Captain M’Vell cleared his throat and opened an intercom channel to transmit his voice throughout the mighty space cruiser.

‘You have all heard the words of our glorious King, long may he reign, and you know how vital this mission is. Our orders are to take her Highness to the edge of a neutral system, where we will rendezvous with a Boluscan vessel, and the Princess will travel on with them to Bolusca for her marriage to the Meg.

I know this has come as a surprise to you all, but secrecy is paramount on this mission. Should the Krai get wind of this alliance ...'

He didn't need to finish the sentence. A murmur went around the crew at the mention of the Krai, the only space-spanning race that the Ilonans hated as much as—and feared more than—the Boluscans. He swivelled his chair to face M'Krell.

'Would you give the word, Highness?' he asked formally.

'The word is given, cousin.' And too low for anyone other than M'Veil to hear she added, 'But do not feel that you have to hurry.'

'As you command, Highness. Navigator, lay in the course. Best speed to the Sol system.'

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❖ Los Angeles.

Diana Just, sometimes known as Black Swan of Strikeforce, returned to her apartment as night was falling. As soon as she opened the door, she was aware of something amiss; her super-human ability to detect patters of energy alerted her that something was in the apartment that shouldn't be.

She smiled grimly. Some burglar had just made the biggest mistake of his life. Without putting the light on, she stepped in and closed the door behind her.

She realised her mistake an instant too late. This wasn't a simple burglary—or even a normal burglar. Whoever it was had a massive internal energy signature. She sensed the blast but was too late to react before it hit her. Her last conscious thought was that she was immune to most forms of energy weapon

The hulking robot gently picked up her limp form and stepped through a teleport portal.

To be continued ...