

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter Ten: Swansong

- ❖ Strikeforce are now accepted as heroes in this century by both the general public and the authorities.
- ❖ Life should now be easy for them.
- ❖ Spoiler: it is not.

*

- ❖ 3 January 1988
- ❖ Strikeforce Space Station

Electron descended the spiral stairway to the recreation deck to investigate the rhythmic thumping that had interrupted his tinkering in the space station's workshop. He found Scorpio in the act of hurling a plastic disc at a combat practice dummy across the deck. The disc struck the dummy and rebounded towards Scorpio, missed his outstretched hand by centimetres, and bounced off the wall to end up rolling across the floor and stopping at Electron's feet.

'What?' was all Electron could manage.

Scorpio walked across the deck to pick up the disc. It was seventy centimetres in diameter and of a convex shape.

'I'm going to put straps on the inside so I can carry it on my forearm,' said Scorpio.

'Ok, good. But what is it?'

'A shield. The final version will have to be metal, I just printed this in the station's three-D fabricator to test the design.'

'Ok, good. But what is it?'

'A shield. Look.' Scorpio demonstrated how it would sit on his arm. 'I can use it to deflect attacks and—' He hurled it edgewise across the deck, like an oversized discus. The rec deck ran the full diameter of the station and served the team as a gymnasium and combat practice area. The 'shield' sailed the full width of the deck with ease, struck the dummy again, and almost returned to Scorpio's hand.

'I can attack with it, also. Needs a bit more practice, though.'

'Scorpio ... James ... your costume is bulletproof. You don't need a shield. And you carry a blaster. Not to mention your bio-energy blasting power.'

'The blaster is a lethal weapon, and my own power isn't very controllable ... I killed a man last time I used it.'

'A mistake—'

'And we can't afford mistakes, Electron. Not now, not in this century. We can make a big difference here, more than we ever did in our century. We're not police officers now, we're something bigger to the people here we're ... heroes ... we can be something inspirational.'

Electron had grown up reading heroic literature, and it had instilled a sense of justice and sacrifice that had led him to join the police and ultimately end up where he was now. He wanted nothing more

than to live up to the ideals he had read about. But it was disconcerting hearing those thoughts coming from the pragmatic, duty-focused Scorpio. He bent down and picked up Scorpio's 'shield', turning it over in his hands.

'It's not just a tool. It's a ... symbol, isn't it?'

'Yes!' Scorpio had known that Electron, of all his team mates, would get it. 'A defensive item, not a gun. You know, in my civilian ID in this century we have a motto, "Protect and Serve". I need to live up to that as Scorpio, too. Or maybe not Scorpio, I'm thinking about changing my code name.'

'If you make this metal ... it needs to be the right weight and it needs to be really strong. When you get the shape right, I can transmute it into an alloy ...'

'Transmute?'

'Part of my power. I can manipulate atomic bonds, change a material into other elements. I don't do it often, it's difficult and hard to control. But I can do this.'

'I'd appreciate it. I was going to machine the final version in the workshop, but I'm not much of a craftsman.'

'Information,' interjected the Computer. 'Incoming teleport. Nightflyer is on the station.'

'Nightflyer, we're on the rec deck, me and Scorpio,' said Electron. 'And you're going to want to see—'

'Come up to the command deck,' interrupted Nightflyer. 'And Computer, page Avatar. We need a team meeting.'

*

Some minutes later, the four Strikeforce members were sitting around the conference table. Scorpio had left his 'shield' in his quarters on the way up. Nightflyer opened proceedings.

'I've just been in Black Swan's apartment. She's not there.'

'She's never there when we call,' said Electron in some annoyance.

'No, I mean, missing. I'd guess she hasn't been there for some days, maybe a few weeks. Food in the refrigerator has expired, and a neighbour hasn't seen her since before the holidays. There's some evidence that a window was forced open, and maybe signs of a struggle.'

'We'd better investigate,' said Scorpio, rising and stepping towards the teleport pad.

'I've *already* invest—ok, fine, you investigate,' said Nightflyer, exasperated.

Some time later, Scorpio, Electron and Avatar returned to the station to find Nightflyer with his feet up and reading a copy of the *Los Angeles Globe*.

'It's almost certain she has been forcibly taken,' said Scorpio.

'No!' said Nightflyer in mock surprise. Scorpio ignored him.

'What we don't know is why or by whom. We can assume somebody who knew she was a Strikeforce member, as her civilian ID can't have made any enemies.'

'And Black Swan would flatten anyone who was only expecting a helpless young woman,' remarked Electron.

'Correct. So, enemies we've made in this century?'

'The Anarchists, a few minor crooks we've arrested around town, the Warscout. That's it.'

'Right. The Anarchists seem most likely. After we captured half their gang last week they might be out for revenge or a prisoner exchange.'

'But how could they have discovered Black Swan's civilian identity?'

'The same goes for the Warscout. He can't associate Black Swan with Diana Just.'

Nightflyer waited until Scorpio and Electron paused in their deliberations before interjecting.

'Computer, tell them what you told me a few minutes ago.'

'Electron, Scorpio and Avatar teleporting up.'

'No! The other thing.'

Information: Diana Just. Date of birth, 8 September 2324. The exact moment of a periodic cosmic string alignment connecting Earth with the black hole Cygnus X-1. Hypothesis: that the alignment was the cause of her mass/energy powers. Hence her adopting the code name Black Swan on joining the Special Police. From the constellation Cygnus, the swan. Observation: the Warscout was attempting to use that alignment's 20th century occurrence to communicate with his Dimension W and destroy the Earth.'

Silence fell on the room.

'Well, isn't that interesting?' said Avatar eventually.

'I knew she wasn't telling us something!' said Scorpio.

'It all fits now,' said Electron. 'How she knew about the cosmic string alignment, the coincidence in names ... chew me, was she working for him all along?'

'No, I refuse to believe that,' said Scorpio loyally.

'No, it makes no sense,' said Nightflyer. 'She helped us stop his scheme. And if she was working for him, why would he need to kidnap her by force?'

'Right ... a coincidence,' said Electron doubtfully.

'My whole life is built on coincidences,' said Nightflyer.

'Mine too!' said Avatar.

'That's a coincidence,' said Electron, but Avatar missed the joke.

'Ok, people, enough,' said Scorpio. 'Practical suggestions for how we rescue her?'

'Thought of that too,' said Nightflyer. 'Computer, tell them the other thing. The other useful thing.'

'Sensors indicate gravimetric disturbances at the south magnetic pole. Disturbances have been mounting in intensity over a ten-day period. Insufficient to pose a physical danger to the Earth.'

'It's ... tenuous,' said Scorpio.

'It feels right, though,' said Nightflyer. And that was that. They all knew enough to trust Nightflyer's intuitive hunches. The south pole was outside their teleport footprint, so they ordered the Computer to prep the shuttle.

'Besides,' said Electron philosophically, 'If it's not Black Swan, it's still worth investigating. It doesn't pose a danger to Earth ... yet.'

*

The Strikeforce stealth shuttle descended vertically into a blinding white expanse of snow. Nightflyer had handled the landing on manual, and a sceptical Scorpio had to admit that his piloting skills were improving massively.

'I've been practicing manoeuvring in orbit,' Nightflyer explained.

'I did notice how the workshop got filled with defunct satellite parts,' said Electron pointedly.

'Hey, that was a useful service,' said Nightflyer unashamedly. 'They were cluttering up space so I salvaged them.'

Bickering aside, Strikeforce could be an efficient team when they needed to be. Donning cold-weather clothing over their uniforms (except Avatar, who had no need of protective clothing), they left the shuttle and trudged across the snow towards a structure they had identified on their approach flight.

It was something that shouldn't have been there. A metallic dome some twenty metres across and ten high, gleaming in the low Antarctic sunlight. Sensors had indicated it lay precisely on the magnetic pole. The fact that no snow or frost lay on it suggested an internal warmth.

'Computer, do you have any information on this structure?' asked Scorpio.

'Working. Confirmed. United Nations approval for a magnetic pole research station. Constructed five years ago by Swan Research.'

‘Well, that confirms it,’ said Electron. Swan Research was the high-tech American corporation that they were fairly sure was a cover for the Warscout’s illicit activities. And again, the coincidence of names stuck out like a sore thumb.

Meanwhile, they had reached the dome and begun to circle it. A quarter of the way round, they found what appeared to be a door set into the metal of the structure. Avatar stepped up to the door and knocked loudly.

‘Avatar!’ said Nightflyer, exasperated.

‘What? How else are we supposed to get in?’ He knocked again, putting his full super-human strength into it. The metal rang loudly with the impacts but was left unmarked and un-dented. ‘Well, that’s tough,’ he said. ‘Wait, I’ll hit it harder.’ He took off into the air.

‘Wait! I can—oh, never mind,’ said Electron as Avatar performed a balletic loop and accelerated down towards the top of the dome. In a tremendous display of his power, he struck it with ear-shattering force. It failed to yield. Stunned, Avatar slid down the curve of the dome and landed at their feet.

‘Tough,’ he said faintly, by way of explanation.

‘Should have put your force-field belt on,’ said Electron. ‘As I was saying, before you let everybody in the Arctic—’

‘Antarctic,’ said Scorpio.

‘—Antarctic know we were here, I can teleport through the dome.’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Avatar weakly, climbing to his feet.

In a flash, Electron was through the door. A minute later, it slid open to reveal him standing in a small airlock-type space.

‘I don’t like teleporting blind,’ he explained, ‘But it’s usually a good bet that there’s an open space right behind a door.’

They entered the airlock, and Electron manipulated an electronic panel to shut the door and open the inner one.

‘Whoa,’ said Nightflyer.

They stood at the edge of a vertical shaft that filled the interior dimensions of the dome and disappeared into the depths of the Earth, as far down as they could see. The whole shaft was brightly lit, but still they could not see the bottom. Warm air rose to greet their downturned faces.

‘This is way beyond 20th-century construction,’ said Nightflyer.

‘Especially down here in the Antarctic,’ agreed Scorpio. ‘What’s it for, I wonder?’

‘Geothermal power, maybe?’ guessed Electron. ‘See those pipes? Could be heat exchanging deep underground. Can you hear the machinery? But what do they need that much power for?’

‘I can see something moving down there,’ said Avatar.

‘Let’s go and say hello,’ said Scorpio. ‘Avatar, can you fly us down?’

‘Grab a hold,’ said the demon. And in moments they were descending rapidly into the Earth.

The shaft was a miracle of engineering. Rock walls were smooth and perfectly vertical, lined with the massive pipes that Electron had pointed out. At intervals, metallic walkways crossed the shaft. On one of these, they soon saw the source of the movement that Avatar had noted. A squat, tracked vehicle crawled across to the wall of the shaft. It paid no attention to them, and as they watched, it reached a set of pipes and extended a short welding appendage.

‘Robotic maintenance,’ said Electron. ‘Probably the whole base was built by robots.’

‘That’s it, then, the Warscout. Robots are his thing,’ said Nightflyer.

‘So the gravitational anomaly *must* be from Black Swan,’ said Scorpio. ‘Computer ... Computer?’ No response came from his communicator, and a quick check showed that the others had the same lack of connection with the Computer, though they could communicate among themselves. ‘Too far underground?’ he guessed.

‘Unlikely,’ said Electron. ‘Maybe ...’

‘MAYBE I AM BLOCKING TRANSMISSION’ came an amplified voice that echoed around the vast space, giving them no clue to its origin. ‘YOUR BLACK SWAN IS ESSENTIAL TO MY PLANS, SO I AM AFRAID YOU CANNOT BE ALLOWED TO RESCUE HER.’

A whistle of powerful engines filled the air, and looking over the side of the walkway Strikeforce saw a squad of half-a-dozen robotic forms jetting up towards them.’

‘Robots!’ said Electron unnecessarily, and then they were engaged in a desperate battle. The robots were humanoid but squat and bulky and armed with energy projectors in their chests. As they drew level with the walkway, they opened fire. There was no cover to be had, forcing Strikeforce to evade the lethal beams as best they could. Scorpio began to wish he had completed his shield, but at the same time was grateful he had not yet abandoned his blaster, as he returned fire at the robots. Electron used telekinesis to deflect their aim, while blasting back with electricity whenever he saw an opening. Avatar was the only one who could take the fight to their flying assailants, and cheerfully tore into them with brute strength.

Nightflyer, in dodging a blast, simply back flipped off the walkway and dropped into empty air. Without wasting breath to explain his plan to his team mates, he had decided the robots were a distraction and the real objective was wherever they had come from.

Dropping forty metres straight down, he snagged a lower walkway with a grapple and used the line to control his fall. When that line reached the end of its length, a flick of the wrist unhooked it while his second line was snaking out to find purchase on another, lower walkway. In this fashion he covered over two hundred metres in a controlled fall faster than any other of his team, even the speedster Avatar, could have done. At that point, his intuition told him he was at his objective and he turned his fall into a swinging arc which catapulted him into a wide side shaft and left him rolling to his feet and ready for action.

His decision had been the right one. At the far end of the horizontal shaft he saw Black Swan, spread-eagled and attached to some kind of apparatus. The familiar red-and-purple clad figure of the Warscout stood near to her. Nightflyer suddenly realised he was alone against a being that had barely been held off by the full team a few months ago.

‘Surrender, Warscout, you’re finished!’ he shouted with false bravado.

‘Finished?’ came the mocking retort. ‘Correct, Nightflyer, I have finished. Finished my experiments here. Black Swan will complete the task you interrupted when we last met. And you ... you will merely ... die.’

An energy pattern formed around the Warscout and Black Swan. Nightflyer recognised it as the teleportation effect the Warscout had used the last time he evaded capture. And like that last time, no matter how fast Nightflyer moved, he could not reach the portal before it closed, taking their enemy and their team mate to who-knew-where.

Nightflyer’s intuition didn’t work on conscious deduction. His brain was hardwired to process sensory cues he wasn’t even aware of, and to form abstract patterns of information into warnings of impending danger. Was it the subtle change in vibration through the floor? The surge of heat from the massive pipes in the shaft? Nightflyer couldn’t say. All he could say, with 100 per cent certainty, was that the Warscout’s parting words were not an idle threat. Strikeforce were in imminent danger of death!

‘Guys! Evacuate!’ He shouted into his communicator even as he flung himself back towards the central shaft. ‘The place is rigged to blow. Avatar, fly them out *now*.’

Nightflyer began climbing the side of the shaft, clinging to pipes and using the smallest ledges to propel himself upwards in leaps and bounds. Too slowly. He knew he wouldn’t make it, and could only hope that the others had picked up the communication and were heading for safety.

In a blur, Avatar flashed down the shaft, swooped round, and plucked Nightflyer from the wall.

‘You’re meant to be getting the others out,’ snapped Nightflyer. He loved last-minute saves, but only when he was the one doing the saving.

‘I can get everyone,’ said Avatar. ‘How long do we have?’

‘Not long enough!’

'Last minute rescues are cool!'

'That's *my* catchphrase!' said Nightflyer, even more peeved.

Even while they bantered, Avatar was accelerating. They passed where Electron was telekinetically levitating himself and Scorpio up the shaft. Their speed was nowhere near Avatar's, but in a manoeuvre so well timed that you could almost believe it was planned (it wasn't), Electron telekinetically 'grabbed' the demon and they were dragged along in his wake. Avatar continued without slowing.

'Door! Door!' shouted Nightflyer in warning, suddenly worried that Avatar wasn't going to stop.

'Don't stop, I've got it,' said Electron.

'You can't teleport—' began Scorpio, but with a crackle of electricity the four of them vanished and reappeared on the other side of the door. '—this many people,' Scorpio finished. As he was holding on to Electron at the time, he felt him go limp, and realised the strain of the group teleport had been too much. At the same time, Electron's telekinetic hold on Avatar failed, and the pair of them went spinning uncontrolled through the air with the full momentum Avatar's flight had imparted to them. Scorpio twisted and cushioned Electron's body as they ploughed into the snow. They skidded to a halt, and Scorpio's first act was to feel for Electron's pulse. He was alive.

Avatar skidded to a halt himself, and he and Nightflyer turned to look back at the others. 'Everybody in one piece?' he asked.

'Mostly,' said Scorpio. 'But Nightflyer, why the panic? The place is still—'

The dome erupted upwards in an ear-splitting explosion, and the ground they stood (or lay) upon bucked like a living thing. The rumbling didn't stop.

'Run,' said Nightflyer. '*Run!*'

Picking up Electron, Scorpio began sliding and skidding away from the now-uncovered shaft. A second later, Avatar picked them both up and they all moved away. Nightflyer, sure-footed even in snow, kept pace with them. The seconds dragged on and the rumbling didn't abate, and a pillar of fire erupted from the shaft, carrying up blazing, molten rocks. Dodging falling cinders, they reached the comparative safety of the shuttle.

'Computer, take her up,' said Scorpio before they had even sealed the belly hatch behind them.

'Confirmed.'

Rising vertically, the shuttle rocked in the suddenly turbulent air and the nose dipped alarmingly towards the ground.

'Information. You may experience turbulence. Please extinguish all smoking materials,' said the Computer, while righting the shuttle. 'And thank you for flying Air Strikeforce,' it added, politely.

Under full power, the shuttle quickly cleared the turbulent air. Nightflyer strapped into the pilot's seat and took manual control, circling the area at a safe distance. They got their first good look at the Warscout's facility. Molten magma welled up through the shaft and was coating an expanding area of ground, while the pillar of smoke and flame continued to grow.

'That's ... a *lot* of collateral destruction just to kill us,' said Nightflyer.

'*That's* how dangerous we are,' said Avatar smugly.

'Did we just make ... a volcano?' asked Scorpio, awed.

'Computer, is there a volcano at the South Pole?' asked Nightflyer.

'Confirmed. You can see it right there.'

'No, I meant in our century?'

'Negative.'

'So much for not changing history,' said Scorpio.

'I think that ship sailed a long time ago,' said Nightflyer. He set a course for a rendezvous with their space station. 'Now, what are we going to do about Black Swan?'

To be continued ...