

Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

Chapter 13: Crossfire

- ❖ 16 January 1988
- ❖ Los Angeles

Don Newman and a team of DICE agents were already on the scene when Strikeforce converged on the trouble spot from different locations around the city.

Scorpio arrived first. The spot was a few blocks from where he kept an apartment in his civilian identity of James Lang, and he had been up early despite spending half the night facing off against Nightwing and Detonator. Guided by the sound of police sirens, he arrived at the busy downtown intersection and immediately saw the source of the alarm. Near the base of a tall office building, lying in a small crater in the street, was a sphere of glowing, crackling energy twelve feet across.

The building was showing a lot of damage from the energy being thrown out, but Scorpio noted that the city police had already erected barriers against traffic and were keeping civilians clear. Apart from a couple of abandoned cars, the only vehicle inside the cordon was the anonymous black DICE van, and Scorpio made a beeline for the blue-uniformed agents who were keeping a careful watch from behind the van's cover.

'Don, what's going on?' he asked. The agent reached out a hand and pulled him to cover as a bolt of energy suddenly erupted from the crackling sphere and struck nearby, demolishing a fire hydrant and adding a shower of water to the general mayhem.

'Down!' Don shouted. 'It's been doing that for several minutes, throwing energy randomly.'

'What is it and where did it come from?'

'Your guess is as good as mine. NASA tracked an object coming in from deep space. So I'm not saying it's aliens, but ...'

Electron chose that moment to teleport down from the space station, the teleport beam depositing him only a few metres from the conversation.

'The Council of Science says there's no such thing as "aliens",' he said, sarcastically. The 24th-century Council of Science said a lot of things he didn't agree with.

More energy lashed out and struck the building, pulverising a large area of concrete.

'Another hit like that and the building's coming down,' said one of Don's companions. Scorpio recognised him as the agent codenamed 'Luey'.

'Is anyone still inside?' he asked.

'I don't think anyone's checked,' said Luey. 'We can't get past that ... thing. But this early on a Saturday morning, it should be empty.'

Scorpio raised his communicator to his lips. ' "Should be" isn't good enough. Nightflyer, Avatar, how long till you're here?'

'Now,' said Nightflyer, dropping down from a roof. 'You want me to search the building? It's 30 stories, it will take ages. Let's just take out the alien.'

'I'm open to plans.' Said Don drily.

'Has anyone tried just blasting it?'

‘Not yet,’ said Electron. He stepped out of cover and sent a powerful bolt of electricity at the object. A flash of energy rippled out from it in an expanding sphere, catching Electron and stunning him with the impact. Nightflyer barely pulled him back behind the armoured van in time to prevent the impact smashing him into the wall behind them. The energy flash picked up an abandoned car and flung it down the street, towards a knot of onlookers by the police barricade.

‘Car!’ yelled Scorpio, helplessly, knowing that none of them would be able to stop it. Even if Electron hadn’t been stunned, his telekinesis was not powerful enough to halt a flying car.

Avatar flew onto the scene, saw the threat, and accelerated towards the car. Interposing himself between it and the crowd, he caught it with ease.

‘Who threw that?’ he yelled, while the crowd behind him cheered.

‘Big glowing thing,’ shouted back Nightflyer helpfully. Without further prompting, Avatar hurled the car back at the sphere of energy.

‘No don’t it will—’ Scorpio started to shout, but it was too late. And, in fact, the sphere didn’t release another wave of energy. Instead the impact of the car had the desired effect, as with a sudden cessation of sound the sphere collapsed in on itself, vanishing.

It left behind a small crater of pulverised asphalt several feet deep and slowly filling with pooling water. At the bottom of the crater stood an imposing, armoured figure. Standing well over eight feet tall, the human-shaped suit was somehow bulky and sleek at the same time. Luey whistled appreciatively at the engineering.

Avatar cared not one bit for the engineering. He just saw a figure that had been throwing cars at helpless humans. He streaked in to attack.

The figure raised both arms as if to ward off Avatar’s impact, but then from each gauntlet erupted bolts of energy that struck Avatar in mid-air, smashing him back.

Nightflyer was also moving, sprinting across the road and leaping down into the crater. The figure turned unsteadily, almost toppled, and righted itself in a jerking motion that looked not just clumsy but positively unnatural to the supremely agile Nightflyer. He held back from striking the figure, remaining poised and ready to dodge.

At that moment, an electric bolt from Electron struck the figure. It grounded harmlessly through the armour, and the figure again raised both arms and returned fire, sending DICE agents scrambling for cover once more. But its arms had been raised jerkily, and Nightflyer was convinced it was looking the other way as it fired.

‘It’s not consciously controlled,’ he said to himself. Before he could raise his voice to share this insight with his team, Avatar was back on the attack, flying into the crater and raining blows down on the armour. The figure shrank back and appeared to cower away from the punches, even though they were clearly having no effect on the armour. Nightflyer, struggling to make himself heard over the pounding of demonic fists on alien metal, shouted, ‘It’s not a threat! Stop hitting it!’

Avatar paused, and Nightflyer moved to face the armoured figure.

‘Do you need help?’ he asked.

He couldn’t gauge his words’ effect, as the figure just stood completely still. Nightflyer shrugged helplessly at Avatar. ‘I don’t think it’s hostile.’

‘It felt hostile to me,’ said Electron, arriving at the crater with Scorpio.

‘Me too!’ said Avatar, rubbing at a painful energy burn on his chest.

‘It’s only been reacting,’ said Scorpio. ‘Defending itself.’ He scrambled down to join Nightflyer. ‘We mean you no harm,’ he said loudly and clearly.

‘Shouting doesn’t actually help if it doesn’t understand English,’ Electron pointed out.

The figure raised an arm, and the entire team tensed. Then it touched a spot on its own neck, and with a loud click and hiss of air, the helmet folded back, followed by the entire front of the suit opening up like a clamshell.

Inside was a humanoid, but not a human, figure. She—because it was clearly a female—stumbled from the suit, and Nightflyer stepped forward to support her. She clung to him.

‘She’s so ... tiny!’ said Avatar in some amazement.

Indeed, the alien was much smaller than the massive suit would suggest. Her head barely reached Nightflyer’s chin, and her frame was so thin and delicate he was worried she might break. Her pale features were equally delicate, her ears rising to points, her cheekbones high and strongly defined, and her eyes elongated, slanting ovals. She wore a skin-tight garment that appeared to be a single sheet of some kind of glossy yellow polymer.

Definitely alien, Nightflyer thought.

Don and his team of agents arrived at the crater, side arms at the ready. ‘Is it secure?’ he asked, while his men gaped at the alien.

‘She’s not a threat, if that’s what you mean,’ said Nightflyer.

‘Good.’ He gestured to two of his men. ‘Get some cuffs on it—her—and get her in the van. Luey, see what you can do about moving that suit.’

The agents gingerly approached the alien, and she shrank against Nightflyer.

‘She won’t need cuffs,’ said Nightflyer. ‘And we’re taking her to our station, not your base.’

‘She’s been blowing apart Los Angeles. It’s my job to make sure she doesn’t do it again.’

‘I think her suit was malfunctioning,’ said Nightflyer obstinately.

‘That’s crazy.’

‘He could be right, Don,’ said Luey from where he was kneeling by the suit. ‘There’s a lot of internal damage here. And a lot of ... hell, I don’t know what any of this is.’

Don thought it over. He had clear jurisdiction here, but there was no way he was going to provoke a fight with Strikeforce.

‘Ok. No cuffs, but she’s coming to the base.’

‘And we’re coming with her,’ said Nightflyer.

‘... Ok.’

Gently encouraging the alien to walk with him, Nightflyer picked his way up and out of the crater.

‘Are you going to pick up *every* woman we come across?’ asked Electron teasingly.

Nightflyer maintained a dignified silence.

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❖ Department of Intelligence and Counter-Espionage headquarters
❖ Los Angeles

It had been difficult prising the alien away from Nightflyer, but she was now safely in a glass-walled cell in a deep level of the underground DICE base. The DICE techs had convinced Strikeforce it was for her own benefit, while they ran medical tests on her. The alien sat on a examination table and submitted stoically as two white-suited and masked medics ran their scans. Strikeforce, along with Don and Major Eastwood, stood in the room outside the cell.

‘What is your name?’ Nightflyer was asking, pointing at her. There was no response. He pointed at his own chest. ‘Steve,’ he said. ‘Steve.’ He pointed at her.

She pointed at her own chest. ‘M’Krell.’

‘M’Krell,’ repeated Nightflyer, pleased.

‘That probably means “chest” in her language,’ said Electron.

‘Don’t be an idiot.’

‘We don’t know if she’s the only one, or just the first,’ Eastwood said. ‘But an army landing in suits like that could wipe the floor with our military.’

‘She’s alone,’ said Nightflyer.

‘How do you know?’

‘I just know!’

‘She didn’t land, as such,’ said Scorpio. ‘The suit was damaged and she was in a crater. I think she crashed.’

‘Makes sense to me,’ said Don. ‘I’ve been there a few times myself.’

‘Me too!’ said Avatar, feelingly.

‘I’m not even sure we should be calling it a suit,’ said Electron. ‘If it flew down from space on its own ... it’s probably her space ship.’

‘A space ship with arms and legs?’ snorted Eastwood.

At that moment, a second alien appeared in the room.

This one resembled a wolf, standing on two legs. Its body was concealed by a one-piece suit of silvery fabric, but its head was exposed and was quite clearly lupine, with an elongated snout that seemed packed with teeth. One of its hands—possessing three fingers and an opposed thumb—rested on the butt of a side arm at its waist. The alien stood almost two metres tall and appeared sleekly muscled.

Before anyone could react, it spoke in English. The voice seemed to come from its chest, while its mouth made low growling noises. Instantaneous translator software in the suit, thought Electron, impressed with the technology.

‘Greetings, people of the Earth. I am Captain Korrett of the battlecruiser *Kabal*, with authority to represent the Krai Empire. I demand that you release the Princess M’Krell to me.’

Nightflyer glanced at M’Krell. She was backing away, as far from the captain as she could get within the confines of her cell. Nightflyer interpreted her look as one of pure terror.

‘Scorpio,’ he hissed, jerking his head at the cell. Scorpio looked where he was indicating, and nodded understanding. This new alien wasn’t here on a friendly rescue mission.

‘Nobody makes demands to me in my own headquarters,’ said Eastwood, almost growling himself. The alien—the Krai—seemed slightly taken aback, as if it had never had an order questioned before.

‘Of course,’ it said, recovering smoothly, ‘You wish to trade. I have authority. I can offer riches. Metals, rare isotopes. The *Kabal* carries stores that would have great value on your primitive world.’

For a moment, Strikeforce thought that Eastwood would explode with apoplexy. Then he strode across to the Krai and poked a finger at it. ‘Primitive?’ he spluttered.

‘Don’t antagonise the wolf thing,’ murmured Electron, while he and the rest of Strikeforce prepared for what they were now sure would be a fight.

‘I am *sick* of aliens turning up on my planet,’ continued Eastwood. Whatever he was going to say next died in his throat as his jabbing finger went through the Krai’s chest. ‘What?’ was all he said.

‘Hologram,’ said Scorpio, relaxing slightly. A projection couldn’t put up much of a fight. Though the hologram was so perfect it had fooled all of them. And existed without any apparent projection mechanism. They were dealing with technology advanced beyond even the 24th-century mainstream.

‘Indeed, I would not lower myself to dealing with primitives personally,’ said the Krai, its snarl evident even through the machine translation. ‘However, the resources of the *Kabal* are vast, and not just in terms of its riches.’

There was a shimmering in the air, and twelve more Krai appeared. Each was slightly smaller than the captain, but each cradled a large blaster at the ready.

‘Bring on as many holograms as you want—’ began Eastwood, when Nightflyer suddenly barrelled into him from behind, knocking him down. Twelve energy bolts passed through the space where Eastwood had been standing.

‘These aren’t holograms,’ said Nightflyer, belatedly, as the blaster bolts blew chunks out of the walls and furniture.

The Krai captain let out a long howl of glee, and Strikeforce suddenly found themselves fighting for their lives.

Blaster fire crackled across the room, and a deafening alarm claxon added to the mayhem. Don and Eastwood, trained combat veterans, scrambled for solid cover and drew their side arms, but the attacking Krai set up such a barrage of fire that they were pinned and unable to raise their heads to return fire. Strikeforce had similar problems. The Krai force was a well-drilled unit, moving in synchronicity to cover the whole room with suppressing fire from their rapid-fire blasters. One of them scored a direct hit on the toughened Plexiglas cell that held M'Krell and the medical staff, adding to the noise as it shattered into a thousand pieces. Covered by suppression fire from the rest of the squad, two of the Krai moved towards M'Krell.

Their tactics were flawless. But those tactics relied on their opponents doing the sane thing and keeping their heads down.

They weren't designed for Nightflyer.

Calmly running through the hail of fire, miraculously avoiding all of it, he dropped both of the advancing Krai with precise blows.

Ten Krai switched from suppression fire and drew aim at Nightflyer.

'Oh, chew—'

That was all the distraction Avatar needed. Lifting the bulky machine he was crouching behind, he hurled it into the mass of Krai. Half of them went down. Electron dropped two more with electric bolts, and a second later Scorpio was wading into the remainder, punching them unconscious. With a growl of anger, the hologram of the Krai captain disappeared.

Nightflyer's first thought was for M'Krell. 'Are you all right?' he asked, knowing she could not understand him. She *looked* all right, he thought.

Eastwood was looking around the ruined laboratory. 'I'm gonna be hauled into another one of *those* budget meetings,' he muttered in disgust. 'Can somebody shut off the damned—' As he spoke, the alarm siren ceased, and a second later Luey burst into the room at the head of a backup squad.

'What the hell?'

'Get these ... things ... in cells,' said Eastwood, waving generally at the unconscious Krai.

'Uh ... I don't think we've got that many cells.'

'Major,' said Scorpio, 'They have teleport capability and more could appear at any time. We need to get the ...'

'Alien princess,' said Electron, amused by the thought.

'The *alien*,' continued Scorpio firmly. 'We need to get her to our station.'

Before Eastwood could answer, another alien appeared. This one was more-or-less human in appearance, hairless and ebony skinned, tall and impressively muscled.

'I am Singularity, leader of the Star Guard, representing the Emissariate of Bolusca. I demand that you turn over the Princess M'Krell.'

'Here we go again.'

To be Continued ...