

# Strikeforce

By David Meadows & Friends

## Chapter 26: End Times

	11 March 2351. ❖
	The day Strikeforce die. ❖
I have analysed every possible attack vector Strikeforce might employ. ❖	Some hold a small chance of success. ❖
	But Strikeforce will fail and die today. ❖
	This is not a prediction, it is a historical fact. ❖
	Their plans will fail. ❖

They had gone over every element of the plan, looking for flaws, coming up with counters for anything the Warscout might throw at them. They knew exactly what they were walking into, and they were more prepared than they had ever been for any other mission.

The point they kept returning to, the only one they couldn't plan a contingency for, was the historical knowledge that this divergent timeline only existed because they had jumped forward in time and died here. None of them understood how this could be true; and if it were true, they didn't know if it were possible to avoid a 'pre-determined' fate.

So they ignored it. The focus was on doing the job they had failed to do in the past: defeat the Warscout, save the world. What did or didn't happen to them in the process was irrelevant. Without explicitly discussing it, they all knew each other well enough to know that each of them would give his life to save millions more.

At the agreed moment, the cloaked Star Guard cruiser in orbit teleported the four of them on board. There, they met Fennec and Centurion, the two members of the human resistance who would assist in the first part of the plan. Centurion wore his powered armour and carried the box that housed a hastily-constructed psionic shield. Fennec, dressed in brown combat fatigues, carried nothing other than the pair of tonfas he fought with.

At the teleport console, the Star Guard scientist they had come to know as Laana was recalibrating the beam.

'I'm going to put all six of you directly onto the command deck of the space station,' she said as she worked, needlessly stating the plan they all already knew by heart. 'That's assuming the schematics you gave me are correct. Because of course I can't scan them without giving us away.'

'They were correct in our time—' began Major Democracy, as the teleport started.

'—Line,' he finished, as the six of them materialised on the command deck of a space station almost identical to the one they were familiar with. It was deserted.

'Centurion, Fennec, that's the teleport,' said the Major, pointing. It wasn't necessary; the two scientists had already identified the relevant equipment and were moving towards it. Their part of the mission was to reprogram it to send Strikeforce directly to the Warscout's island, through its protective force shield. Strikeforce could do nothing but wait for them to finish their work.

'I've got a bad feel—' began Nightflyer, when a lithe figure in a hooded grey jumpsuit swung down the stairwell from the upper observation deck and kicked him clear across the command deck.

The Major moved to intercept the attacker, but with surprising speed it evaded his blow and struck back with a punch that sent him reeling.

‘Keep working,’ Electron shouted to the scientists, even while blasting a bolt of electricity at the attacker, calculating just enough voltage to fry robotic circuits. To his surprise, it took the bolt without slowing, crossed the deck in a single leap, and would have knocked him out with a single kick if the Major hadn’t interposed his shield.

‘It’s not a robot!’ said Electron.

‘You think?’ asked Nightflyer, bounding back into the fray and sweeping the attacker’s legs from behind. Well, that was his plan. The attacker seemed to anticipate the move, leaped over Nightflyer’s sweeping kick, and twisted to face him.

Nightflyer recoiled in shock when he got his first good look at the attacker. ‘It’s me!’

Avatar grabbed the assailant and spun him round.

It was Nightflyer. A perfect physical duplicate.

‘It’s you!’ said Avatar.

At that moment, three more figures swung up from the lower deck and spread out. Each one was a perfect copy of Nightflyer.

‘Well, there’s something you don’t see every day,’ said Electron. ‘Oh, wait—yes I do, actually!’

Nightflyer vaulted over the central table and kicked at one of the ‘imposters’. It moved just as fluidly as he did, evading the kick and grabbing his ankle to redirect his momentum towards a bulkhead. *That’s just what I would have done*, Nightflyer thought, as he kicked the imposter in the head, and then grabbed a support post to swing around and kick him again. *That felt weird*.

The other three Nightflyer lookalikes were engaging the other Strikeforce members. At first things went badly, with the sheer surprise value of facing clones of their teammate hampering the heroes’ responses.

Fennec turned from where he was reprogramming the station’s teleport. He held a tonfa in each hand and waded in to aid Electron, the weapons spinning dangerously. Not just a scientist, he was a superbly trained combatant, and multiple rapid attacks drove the ‘Nightflyer’ backwards. With the breather this gave him, Electron unleashed his most powerful blot of electricity. The target went down.

The Major was holding his own. Nowhere near as fast as Nightflyer, what he lacked in speed he made up for with skill. His blows struck home time and time again, while counterattacks invariably connected with the Major’s shield. The ‘Nightflyer’ was being worn down, when Electron grabbed him telekinetically and drove him into a bulkhead with crushing force.

Avatar was faring less well. The ‘Nightflyer’ dodged every one of his powerhouse punches. He would only need to connect once, but he couldn’t manage even that. Teamwork came to the rescue again, when the Major flung his shield, catching the ‘Nightflyer’ while he was off-balance from dodging Avatar. The ‘Nightflyer’ stumbled, and his fluid movements were disrupted for the split second that Avatar needed to finally land a punch. That Nightflyer went down.

‘Ok, what the hell was that?’ asked Electron, looking accusingly at Nightflyer—Strikeforce’s Nightflyer.

‘Don’t look at me!’ Nightflyer said. ‘I’m just as confused as any of you!’

‘Robots?’ guessed the Major.

‘Robots don’t move like that,’ said Nightflyer.

‘They’re living,’ said Fennec, kneeling to check one of the unconscious bodies.

‘Clones?’ asked Electron. ‘Evil twin brothers?’

‘Can we park this discussion for when you have time?’ Centurion cut in. ‘The beam is set for the Warscout’s island, and it looks like our guess was right, it’s set to bypass the force field surrounding the island. You will arrive right in the nerve centre.’

‘You’re against the clock,’ said Fennec. ‘He’s going to know what we’re doing now. Every second you waste is a second he has to bring in more defenders.’

‘As long as they’re robots and not Nightflyers,’ muttered Electron.

‘Move,’ said Centurion, urgently. He picked up the psionic shield generator and thrust it into Electron’s hands. ‘You know what to do.’

‘And you know what to do,’ said the Major as Strikeforce stepped onto the teleport pad. ‘Get back to the Star Guard ship, and back down to Earth. If we fail, you’re the Earth’s last hope.’

‘Understood, Major. It’s been an honour,’ said Centurion. He was certain he would never see any of them again.

‘Ready?’ asked the Major. Three quick nods. ‘Computer, I mean, Centurion, beam us down.’

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They landed in a massive enclosed space. A translucent dome of force arced a hundred metres or more above their heads, enclosing an area large enough to house several buildings. The space between the buildings was littered with free-standing machinery, and power conduits ran everywhere.

But only one thing drew their gazes. In the centre of the space a ball of pure energy, some 40 metres across, sat in a cradle of scaffolding. The mathematically perfect sphere glowed a bright orange that hurt the eyes, while lighter and darker patches swirled around the surface—convection currents, Electron realised. He had never seen anything like it, but it was obviously the fusion powersphere they were here to attack.

‘Seriously, four Nightflyers?’ Avatar was asking, incredulously.

‘Don’t ask me! I have no idea—’

‘Let’s save this for another day,’ said the Major. ‘Let’s do our job.’

‘Right. Point me at something to smash,’ said Avatar.

The job was to attack the facility so convincingly that the Warscout would intercede in person in order to stop them. Allowing them to stop him. That was the theory.

Electron pointed at a large structure to their left. ‘That’s a distribution unit. Go for it.’

Avatar took to the air and flew towards the indicated target. Hovering mid-way up the two-storey tower, he punched it with his full strength. It buckled, teetered, and fell amidst a spectacular light show.

‘Well, this is easy,’ he said.

Then the first wave of defences hit them.

As expected, the immediate response came from maintenance robots, hastily repurposed to fight with whatever they possessed that could serve as improvised weapons. They closed in on the team, wielding plasma torches, cutting lasers, even mechanical grabbers. The result was predictable. Like a precision unit, Strikeforce smashed through the unarmoured, clumsy machines without breaking a sweat.

Then the second wave began to arrive. These were a serious threat; combat robots, armed and armoured, and programmed to fight intelligently.

Electron could destroy robots with electric blasts, but he wanted to conserve his energy so he fought cautiously. Scorpio and Nightflyer, without the raw power to smash solid armour plate, were relegated to using their agility and fighting skills to keep robots off balance and their weapons diverted from Avatar. The demon was Strikeforce’s only real weapon against these robots. Flying this way and that, he charged and punched and crunched and tore.

One after the other, the combat bots fell.

‘We could do with four more Nightflyers just now,’ said Electron as he barely deflected a missile with his telekinesis.

‘Just shut up about it!’ snapped Nightflyer, while he swung a bipedal robot into path of a flying unit so that both exploded into a fireball. Nightflyer somersaulted away from the explosion and dropped next to where Electron was sheltering by a building wall. He was battered, bruised and bleeding from multiple near-misses, the result of prioritising offence over defence too many times.

‘Are you ok?’ asked Electron.

‘I can do this all day,’ said Nightflyer truthfully. ‘How are you holding up?’

‘Badly,’ admitted Electron. ‘I can’t keep this up all day.’

The Major ran towards them, his shield deflecting a spray of plasma aimed at him by a flying robot. A second later, Avatar punched through the flyer and it crashed to the ground, to join the scrap metal now littering the field.

‘This is not getting us anywhere,’ the Major said.

Electron shrugged ‘Maybe the Warscout’s too smart to fight us, he said.

‘Then we need to be smarter.’

The Major raised his wrist communicator to his lips. Nightflyer raised an eyebrow.

‘We haven’t been using them in case the Warscout overheard us,’ said the Major. ‘So, let’s make sure he hears us now.’ He activated the communicator. ‘Avatar, don’t let the robots distract you. Go straight for the powersphere.’

Hovering above, Avatar stared at his own communicator as if it were insane. Then, shrugging, he flew directly at the huge orange sphere.

Unnervingly, their Computer’s voice came from their newly re-activated communicators.

‘Two minutes and forty seconds until time jump,’ it said.

‘Of course, Carla programmed a countdown for us,’ said Electron.

‘That’s not much time,’ said Nightflyer. ‘If something doesn’t happen very soon—’

In a burst of multi-coloured light, a familiar form materialised, hovering in the air midway between them and the powersphere.

The Warscout evidently still favoured the original robotic form they had first encountered in the 20th century. A flexible outer covering of crimson metallic fabric, with an opaque, bucket-like helmet, and a long purple cape that appeared to be purely decorative.

Avatar halted his charge. ‘This is where I destroy you,’ he shouted.

‘I was about to use the same words,’ said the Warscout in a mocking tone.

Electron threw the control on the shield generator he had been carrying. There was no obvious physical effect, but his mental awareness told him that the barrier was active.

The Warscout evidently sensed it also. He cocked his head on one side. ‘What? Oh, I see. You think you have trapped me here with you. In fact, all you have done is trap yourselves here with ME!’

As he bellowed the last word, the Warscout raised his hands and fired blasts of purple energy at Strikeforce. Nightflyer dodged, pulling Electron clear as he did so. Major Democracy elected to take the blast on his shield. The impact still drove him back and left him on the ground, stunned. He looked at the shield in shock. Forged of the toughest alloy known to 24th-century science, it had buckled and partially melted under the blast.

‘I’m going to need a stronger shield,’ he said.

Avatar accelerated towards the Warscout, at the same time as Electron fired his most powerful electric bolt. Both bolt and demon smashed into an invisible barrier, twenty metres short of their target.

‘Force field!’ said Electron.

‘Indeed! While I can still strike at you by simply adapting my anti-phased energy!’ Purple blasts lashed out again, causing Strikeforce to scatter and seek cover. The Warscout’s laughter mocked them.

‘Four centuries of development and he’s still doing the monologues and manic laughter?’ said Electron.

Avatar had by now shaken off the effects of his collision with the force field and had swooped up to it. ‘Laugh at this,’ he said, punching it with his full strength. The field flared briefly while it absorbed the kinetic energy ... and held. Avatar circled what was apparently a solid bubble of force around the Warscout and rained blows on it. ‘I ... can’t ... break ... it!’ he grunted.

‘Avatar, you can get through it in your astral form!’ the Major shouted. ‘Hit him with magic!’

‘I can’t!’

‘It’s ok, we will guard your body,’ said the Major, assuming that was the demon’s concern.

'No! I mean I can't!' Ignoring the Warscout, Avatar turned to face Strikeforce. 'I can't. I've lost my magic!'

'I knew it!' said Nightflyer.

'Not helping, Nightflyer,' said the Major. 'All right, next plan: we ... we ...'

'Seventy-five seconds until time jump,' came from their communicators.

The Warscout's laughter became louder, echoing round the space. 'You hear that, Strikeforce?' He hurled more energy blasts, which they barely avoided again. 'You will vanish in less than one minute. And you will arrive in 1988 as lifeless husks. Which means that at some point in the next ... fifty seconds I will succeed in burning the life from you.' More blasts followed. It felt like he wasn't even aiming now, toying with them because he knew the historical inevitability was that they would fall.

'Electron, can you teleport through?' asked Nightflyer.

'Yes, but I'll only have one shot, and I don't think I'm powerful enough to—' Electron stopped as an awful plan popped into his mind. He thought over the powersphere physics that Satellite had tried to make him understand. Then he spoke rapidly, needing to make them aware, to agree, before he followed through with his idea.

'I have enough to damage the powersphere, not catastrophically, but to weaken the containment field in one spot. It's a miniature sun, held in magnetically. I make a weak point, and some of its energy comes out before it seals itself.

'So?' asked the Major.

'So, imagine a solar flare, filling this space.'

'Ten seconds until time jump.'

'Do it,' said Nightflyer instantly.

'It will mean—'

'We know. Do it.' said the Major.

Avatar landed next to them.

'Do it,' he said.

'Five seconds until time jump.'

Electron fired everything he had at the powersphere. He watched as if time had slowed down around him as the point he had hit flared, then dulled, then an almost imperceptible ripple appeared in the magnetic containment. The ripple became a hole, and from the hole poured the energy of a star. Electron watched curiously as an unbearable glow spread from the hole, annihilating everything in its path, overloading the Warscout's force bubble and consuming the Warscout robot, reducing it to component atoms. The flare spread outwards and onwards, towards Strikeforce. The velocity of the boiling plasma should be phenomenal, yet to Electron it seemed to be crawling towards him.

*I shouldn't be able to perceive this*, Electron thought. The passage of time seemed to grow even slower, if that were possible, the wave of plasma now crawling towards him, and finally freezing a few centimetres short of his body. He felt no heat. *Of course not*, he thought, *the radiation is moving too slowly*. He wondered if this was what being dead was like. It could make for an awfully boring afterlife, he mused.

Around him, the rest of Strikeforce were part of the same curiously frozen scene. They shared the same thought:

*How is this possible?*

'Strikeforce, this is not possible. I have been required to intervene.'

The voice came from all around them, or possibly they felt it directly in their minds. In front of them, a portion of the frozen plasma swirled, coalesced into a humanoid shape, and brightened from orange through yellow, pure white, and finally settling on an unbearably reflective silver. The silver man gazed at them with blank, silver eyes, and 'spoke' again, with motionless lips.

'Do not fear for your lives. I have halted the movement of time in this vicinity.' The voice was human, male they thought, but completely without emotion or inflection.

‘And who are you?’ Electron tried to ask. His frozen body refused to obey him and speak, but he somehow knew that not only the silver man but all of Strikeforce could ‘hear’ him.

‘You may call me the Silver Sentinel. I am a caretaker of this reality.’

Major Democracy struggled in vain against the perfect paralysis. ‘What do you want with us?’ he said/thought.

‘Nothing but to preserve your lives.’

‘Uh, thanks?’ said Avatar.

‘By coming to this time, you have caused a paradox greater than any we have seen before, somehow creating this superimposed reality. My task is to undo your mistake and return the universe to the shape it should have.’

‘You couldn’t have done this before we time travelled and saved us all some trouble?’ asked Electron.

‘Indeed not. The laws laid down by the Golden Guardian do not allow us to intervene until the paradox is inevitable. This reality was formed when you died in it; and as long as you lived you could have avoided it. Until your final moment of choice, the paradox was not inevitable, either outcome, paradox or no paradox, had equal probability. This timeline and the timeline in which you were born are in superposition, both existing, until you made the final choice that would result in the reality waveform collapsing, one timeline surviving and the other never having existed.’

‘The cat was both alive and dead,’ said Electron. ‘Quantum mechanics,’ he explained for the others’ benefit.

‘Magic,’ Avatar corrected him.

‘What you should have done—what any sane being would have done—is saved yourselves and left this reality to die.’

‘We could never do that,’ said the Major. The Silver Sentinel continued as if he had not spoken.

‘What you instead did was ensure that this reality was created, a reality in which you were never born, which means you cannot be here to allow this reality to be created, which means you—well. You see now why the Golden Guardian is insane?’

‘Who is the Golden Guardian, and no, we don’t see why he’s insane,’ said Nightflyer, becoming annoyed with all these cryptic messages.

‘My superior being, and it is unimportant,’ said the Silver Sentinel, unhelpfully. ‘Now, I must ensure that you live, and return you to 1988. You still have work to do.’

‘Wait, so you’re our guardian angel? You’re going to be saving us every time we screw up now?’ asked Nightflyer, alarmed at the idea. He firmly believed he should be free to screw up if he chose to.

‘No. Why are you so obtuse? I am allowed to intervene only to repair the universe. The next time you fail and die in 1988, you will fail and die in 1988.’

‘We’re going to die in 1988?’ asked Avatar.

‘No! Not all of you. I mean—the future is not set. You may. You may not. But if you do, I will not be there to save you.’ The emotionless voice was starting to sound slightly peeved.

‘Don’t antagonise the omnipotent being, Avatar,’ joked Electron. The whole episode was starting to feel unreal to him.

‘Now, to return you and—’

‘Stop!’ commanded the Major. To everyone’s surprise, the silver being actually shut up and listened.

‘You return us and this timeline dies? There are billions of living beings here. We haven’t fought and died to save them only so you can wipe them out of existence. I can’t allow this.’ In the face of an apparently omnipotent being, this was pure bravado, and they all knew it. But the Silver Sentinel paused for a long time, and seemed to consider the words.

‘I will not destroy it,’ he said finally. I have examined your futures, and it appears that at some point I will need to create a new universe to contain your mistakes.’

‘You—’

‘Our—’

‘New—’

‘Huh?’

Exclaimed Strikeforce, variously.

‘I will wrap this reality into a pocket dimension and keep it. These people you have fought for will live. For now. And now, before the Guardian sees this transgression and intervenes, let us end this.’

\*

❖ 5 March 1988

❖ Strikeforce space station, Geostationary Earth Orbit.

Finally, Carla summoned them back to the station.

‘I’m ready to send you back to the future,’ she said.

‘Great Scott!’ exclaimed Astra dramatically, feeling slightly silly when nobody even smiled at the reference.

‘You will return to this spot in six days, one hour, and seven minutes of your subjective time—your communicators are programmed with a countdown,’ were her final words as the four Strikeforce members stepped onto the teleport platform. ‘It’s going to happen automatically, no sooner, no later, whatever you do, er, up there. Six days will pass for us as well as you, and we’ll be here to meet you.’

There were no further instructions, nothing helpful Carla could tell them that they didn’t already know. Hanging in the air was the unspoken thought that this was experimental, untested science, and anything could happen. But Strikeforce had been in that position before, and faced it unflinchingly now as they did then.

‘Understood,’ said the Major. ‘See you in six days. Computer, four to beam ... up?’

‘Confirmed,’ said the Computer.

‘Good luck!’ shouted Astra.

The teleport booth shimmered briefly, and the four heroes were gone. Carla was monitoring the teleport diagnostics intently.

‘I think it worked,’ she announced.

‘You think?’ asked Astra, nervously.

‘We’ll know in six days.’

The next six days felt more like six years to Astra. With the teleport temporarily converted to a time machine, she and Carla were confined to the station, the two diametrically different women slowly driving each other insane.

But finally, the Computer counted down the last few minutes, and they stood expectantly on the command deck, facing the teleport pad.

‘Incoming teleport activity,’ the Computer announced as the count reached zero.

With a familiar shimmer, the teleport pad operated.

‘Oh,’ said Carla, ‘Thank God.’ She threw her arms around a stunned Electron. He looked around at the faces of his team mates and saw in their eyes that they remembered everything he did. That it had all been real.

‘Yes, I think so,’ was all he said.

**The End.**