

MATT FORBECK'S

BRAVE

NEW

WORLD

RESOLUTION



12  
FOR  
twelve



**MATT FORBECK'S  
BRAVE NEW WORLD:  
RESOLUTION**

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*Matt Forbeck's Brave New World* created by Matt Forbeck.



Dedicated to my wife Ann and our kids Marty, Pat, Nick, Ken, and Helen,  
who always help me keep my resolutions — like this.

Thanks to Darren Orange and the crew at Reactor 88 Studios and John  
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Huge thanks to all the readers who backed this book and the rest in the  
trilogy on Kickstarter. See the end of the book for a full list of their names.  
Each and every one of them rocks, and I can only hope that this book  
justifies the faith they showed in me.

# 12 FOR '12

This is the standard edition of a book first released as a reward for the backers of my first Kickstarter drive for [my 12 for '12 project](#), my mad plan to write a novel a month for the entirety of 2012. Together, over 260 people chipped in more than \$13,000 to successfully fund an entire trilogy of novels based on my *Brave New World* roleplaying game, a dystopian superhero setting in which superpowers have been outlawed for anyone that doesn't work for the government.

Thanks to each and every one of them for daring me to take on this incredible challenge — and for coming along with me on the wild ride it promises to be. And thank you to all my readers, whether you're backers or not. Stories have no homes without heads to house them in.



## Location Key

- R Crescent City Marina
- B Delta Academy
- C Delta Prime HQ
- D Finnegan's Irish Pub
- E Just Us
- F New Alcatraz
- G New Dearborn Station
- H I-90K International
- I Safehouse #1
- J Safehouse #2
- K Safehouse #3
- L Superior Park
- M Triumph Tower

- Crescent City is broken into 5 parts
1. Far Northside
  2. Near Northside
  3. Downtown
  4. Near Southside
  5. Far Southside

Crescent City is also known as the Promethean City for its proven ability to recover from even the worst disasters.

**Superior Park**  
Located in the heart of the city, this park features a memorial to the lost alphas.

**Patriot's Safe-houses**  
Patriot has several safehouses. They're numbered by order of appearance.

**Delta Prime HQ**  
Delta Prime's national headquarters is located here, at the heart of the struggle.

**NEAR NORTHSIDE**  
**CHICAGO BAY**  
**FAR NORTHSIDE**

**New Alcatraz**  
New F  
Super prison built on an island of debris left behind when Chicago disappeared

**NEAR SOUTHSIDE**  
**DOWNTOWN**  
**FAR SOUTHSIDE**

## CRESCENT CITY

When Chicago disappeared on July 4, 1976, Lake Michigan surged into the crater, left behind in northeastern Illinois. The resulting tidal wave destroyed everything within several miles of the rim. The new metropolis of Crescent City was built along the edge of that crater. In the 23 years since, Crescent City has become the nexus of delta activity on the planet. It is here that Delta Prime is headquartered, and it is also here that the Defiance has chosen to make its stand.

# BRAVE NEW WORLD



# CHAPTER ONE

*SEPTEMBER 4, 1999: PATRIOT*

I couldn't tell you the last time I'd had a vacation — unless you count the few days I spent in New Alcatraz back in July. It had to have been years.

It's not like being the leader of the strongest delta resistance movement in the world — free or otherwise — comes with a full rack of benefits and two weeks off. Sure, I'd spent a lot of time in hiding, but anyone who's ever had to do that can tell you that it's no vacation. Keeping out of the hands of Delta Prime when you're Public Enemy Number One is a full-time job.

Still, I hadn't often felt the lack of time off. When you have a good cause to dedicate yourself to, you return to it as naturally as you might to your favorite restaurant. It just feels right.

After the disaster Street, Lisa, and I had taken part in while rescuing the Franklin family, I decided that we should head south for a bit rather than back to Crescent City. While little Tiara was eager to get back to the city where she'd grown up, her parents — Temple and Frieda — hadn't been hard to convince otherwise. They'd hauled up their stakes and fled from Delta Prime there once already, and nothing in Crescent City had changed that would make it any safer for them back there.

More like the opposite.

So we made our way down to Isla Delta, a delta refuge off the Atlantic side of Costa Rica. I'd sent lots of people to its sandy

beaches over the years, and I'd been there a few times myself. I'd always had other pressing matters that kept me from staying there long myself though.

Thing was, I hadn't ever seen Isla Delta as a resort. I know, lots of people melt inside when they see gentle waves crashing on sandy shores, but to me Isla Delta was little more than an island-sized holding cell, the one place in this hemisphere where I knew I could stash people safe from the grasp of Delta Prime. The idea of lying on the beach and enjoying a cold bucket of Imperial beers on ice while working on nothing more intense than my tan never occurred to me.

I have to admit, though, I'd grown to like it.

It had taken us the better part of a week to get down there. Glacier and the other Defiants in Denver had furnished us with a Suburban and put us on the road south, but we'd been forced to travel at odd hours, under the cover of night, to avoid attracting too much attention. We made it all the way to Texas without an incident, but that was the easy part.

I had thought it was going to be harder to get across the Mexican border than it proved. Sure, it's a lot easier to leave the USA than it is to get into it, but when your face has been plastered across wanted posters for years, you try to avoid even cursory glances from law-enforcement officials.

While I didn't want to get our mugs in front of any of the US Border Patrol agents, I hated the thought of trying a dangerous desert crossing with the Franklins in tow. We sent them across the bridge at Brownsville on foot while Street and Lisa drove across in the SUV with me tucked in a space Street had hollowed out under the rear bench seat.

I didn't want to go that way, but I had the most recognizable face of any of us. If we got stopped, Street and Lisa stood the best chance of getting away, and then the Franklins could literally just walk away from it all. It made sense, even if I nearly passed out from the stifling heat under that damn seat.

We rendezvoused deep in Matamoros on the other side of the Rio Grande, which wasn't much more than a creek at that point, and

headed south again. From there it was mostly smooth sailing all the way down to Belize. We had a small problem with a gang of drug runners who wanted our ride just outside of Veracruz, but a few well-placed plasma blasts put a fine point on the notion that we were far more trouble than they wanted to deal with.

Once in Belize, we met up with a group of local Defiants with an expatriate pal who owned a beautiful sailboat, a 70-foot wooden racing yacht called *The Mistress*. He brought us straight down the Atlantic seaboard until Isla Delta hove into sight over the southern horizon. We said farewell to Captain McCormick then and hello to our new home.

I wasn't planning on staying long, but Truth convinced me that we needed to lay low for a while, at least until she figured out what had happened with Superior. The last she'd heard, my old pal Ragnarok had escorted the world's greatest hero into the Oval Office, but there hadn't been a peep about him from anyone since. The news either didn't know about his return, or the Feds had squelched the news fast. It was the kind of thing that would spread fast, even if everyone who'd seen him had been sworn to secrecy, but despite that Truth hadn't been able to find much about it at all.

Not even Braintrust, the man Truth had deep inside Delta Prime, had been able to tell her anything about it. He had his guesses, of course, but we couldn't depend on those.

Truth said that Braintrust was the closest thing she'd seen to an alpha since 1976, back when they'd all disappeared. Here this guy had popped up this summer, and then Superior came back from the long-supposed dead where we'd figured everyone in Chicago had gone — including my wife and all the rest of the alphas. Seems they and the entire city had been trapped in a pocket dimension all that time, and he'd just now managed to make his way back, a harbinger of things to come.

It was enough to make my head hurt, and I wanted to do something about it. Truth rightfully pointed out that there wasn't any rush. Chicago had been gone for over twenty-three years, and a week here or there wasn't likely to make much of a difference. I

couldn't help but wonder about that though.

I know that if we had been a little too slow during the breakout at New Alcatraz, all of Crescent City would have been destroyed — along with a good chunk of the returning Chicago, if Superior's story could be believed. I couldn't shake the feeling that wheels were turning whether we watched them or not, and I worried that something horrible would happen while we were taking it easy on the beach.

I got overruled. It didn't happen often, but every now and then Truth reminded me that I was in charge of tactics but she handled strategy. She begged me to trust her on this, and eventually I agreed. So I traded in my mask and trench coat for a pair of swimming trunks and decided that if I was going to be stuck in paradise I might as well enjoy it.

That's where I was when the air-raid sirens went off.

## CHAPTER TWO

*SEPTEMBER 4, 1999: PATRIOT*

Even on a refugee island like Isla Delta, most people have to work. Newcomers might be exempt for a while, taken care of by the residents until they could get on their feet. Most folks managed to find something worthwhile to keep themselves busy with during the week soon enough, despite that.

This was a Saturday morning, though, and the beach was as busy as I'd ever seen it. That's nothing like the artificial beaches in Crescent City, of course, where the sunbathers are stacked so close together you can't find a space between their tanning mats. Isla Delta has a good mile of open sand to relax on, and even if every delta on the place decided to go there at once, we'd still have plenty of space to toss a Frisbee around without much fear of hitting a bystander.

To look at them, you'd think none of the people on that beach were deltas. There were people of all ages — even families with babies — and of every size, shape, and skin tone you could imagine. When I'd arrived on Isla Delta the week before, I'd been one of the palest people in the place, but a long day in the sun had turned me lobster red soon after. Fortunately, a delta healer at the hospital had been having a slow day and was happy to help me with that before I blistered all to hell.

The people on the beach that morning all seemed like they were having a good time on their day off. I'd gone down there with Street,

who'd been rooming with me, but he'd raced off to play in the ocean with Lisa soon after we'd arrived. The kid had never seen a surfboard in real life before we'd gotten there, and he and Lisa had been taking lessons every day since.

It made me smile to see them together, him with his dark curly hair and her with her long blonde locks. After a couple days, they'd shed their Crescent City attitudes and let the tropical heat flow right through them. They held hands, grinned, and looked like they belonged there — and with each other, maybe forever.

When the air-raid siren went off, I was already into my second beer. I felt calm and relaxed for the first time I could remember. I was warm all the way through, from the top of my head to the tips of my toes, and I had nowhere to go and nothing to do.

The noise shattered that. The moment it started, I bounced to my feet, knocking the rest of my beers over into the sand.

I wasn't the only one. Every person on the beach had leaped to their feet and started to gather their things and head back into the little village they called home. Few of them seemed panicked though. They moved like they'd all seen things worse than this before, and given the fact they were mostly escaped deltas, I felt sure they had. They worked through it like they'd drilled for this possibility dozens of times. They might be scared, but they knew exactly what they had to do.

I, on the other hand, had no clue.

"What the hell is that?" Street said as he and Lisa charged up from the water, their feet slipping in the sand.

I ignored him as I grabbed the arm of a middle-aged man walking past me with all his gear in a netted sack on his back. "What's happening?" I said.

He shrugged me off with an angry scowl that melted when he saw who I was. "It's the emergency siren." He pushed his glasses back up on his sweaty nose. "I've never heard it outside of a drill before."

"What's it for?"

He shrugged and started walking as he spoke. Street, Lisa, and I scrambled to keep up with him. "I don't know any more than you

do," he said. "Not yet. When the sirens go off, we're to report to our homes or offices for instructions. They come over the radio."

I turned to Street as the man raced off, and he'd already taken his CD player out of his beach bag and tossed it over to me. I thumbed it over to the radio function, and sound squawked out of it. I didn't have to tune it. There was only one station on the entire island.

"—repeat. This is not a drill. We are under attack." The announcer stopped for a moment to clear his throat and started again.

"Just minutes ago, Nicaraguan radar picked up two jets coming in our direction over the Atlantic ocean, from the direction of south Florida. No friends to the United States, the Nicaraguan authorities alerted us as soon as the planes cleared Cuban airspace and continued on in our direction.

"At the moment, these jets have not identified themselves to us. We must assume that they are trouble, possibly part of a long-rumored invasion of our island by Delta Prime. Until this can be verified, all citizens are to report to their civil defense assignments and prepare themselves as directed, as ordered by the island council and President Enrique Salvador."

I flipped the radio off and grimaced at Street and Lisa. "What can we do?" she said, worry creasing her tanned face.

Street shrugged at her. "We're standing here in our swimsuits, and we don't have a 'civil defense assignment' yet." He looked to me. "Right?"

I nodded as I scanned the beach. "That doesn't mean we can't help."

"How are we going to do that?" Lisa said. She threw up her hands in helpless frustration.

I spotted what I wanted coming at us in the sky from the south. A dark-haired woman in a tank top and a long, floral-print skirt came zipping along the beach, about twenty feet off the ground. I recognized her at once and waved her down.

She gazed down at us for a moment without recognition, but I saw the light go on over her head as she saw who I was. An instant later, she touched down right in front of me and threw her well-tanned

arms around me.

“John!” she said with a wide grin sparkling in her brown eyes. “I heard you were in town!”

“Good to see you, too, Terri.” I glanced at the others. “I’ll introduce you later. How’s your flying doing?”

She held up her arms and flexed her toned biceps. “Still practicing every day. Why?”

I jerked my head up toward the northern sky. “I need a lift.”



## CHAPTER THREE

*SEPTEMBER 4, 1999: PATRIOT*

A few minutes later, while the rest of Isla Delta was battenning down the hatches and waiting to see what storm would hit their little Caribbean home this time, Terri had hauled me high up into the sky above them. From this height, I could see the entire island and the wide ocean beyond, as well as the outline of Costa Rica off to the west. I didn't see any sign of an incoming jet just yet, but I kept my eyes peeled to the north, searching for any hint of the reported pair of aircraft.

"I don't often come up this high," Terri said as the seagulls circled below us. "Not really much call for it. Beautiful though."

"I don't ever," I said. "Not without a plane or a parachute."

"Should have brought one with us," she said. "It's a long fall from here. You hit the water, and it'll be like smacking into concrete."

"Thanks for the visual," I said. "Are you planning on dropping me?"

She shook her head and laughed. "But plans do change."

"Tell me about it." I pointed at a pair of specks that appeared against a low line of clouds scudding in from the north. "That look like them?"

"Could be. Are we done here?"

I looked up over my shoulder at Terri. She was holding me up from under my armpits, and I had to weigh half again as much as she did. She carried me along like I wasn't anything more to her

than a sack of groceries though.

Delta powers are strange things. I can't claim to know much about the science behind them — and really, neither can just about anyone else. They let their users do things that are literally impossible by any known laws of physics, but we do them anyhow, so I suppose that's proof enough that they can be done.

"Not yet," I said. "This isn't just a reconnaissance mission."

I let the plasma energy that coursed through my body collect in my hands. They started to glow with an orange nimbus visible even in the brightness of the tropical sunlight.

"What the hell are you planning, John?" Terri sounded nervous, and I can't say I blamed her. After all, we had to be a couple thousand feet in the air, at least, and here I was gearing up for a plasma blast that could have totaled a car.

"Just want to be ready for whatever might happen," I said.

The specks on the horizon grew larger at an alarming rate. I could see that they would be on us at any moment. "How fast can you go?" I asked.

"With you in my arms?" She started to move off to the side out of the path of the oncoming jets. "Not nearly as fast as those guys."

"Without me? Could you keep up?"

"I could try."

"John!" a voice said in my head. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Hey, Ricky." That's what I like to call President Salvador, even when he used his telepathic powers to speak directly to my mind. "Just checking things out from a new perspective."

"You need to get down from there. It's not safe."

I glanced down between my feet at the rippling water far below.

"I think I'm aware of that." I spoke out loud. I could have tried to speak to him silently, in my mind, but he's the telepath, not me. Let him do the work.

"Are you talking with Ricky?" Terri said. "Tell him hi from me. Oh, and that this was all your idea."

"I'm not going to tell you to get the hell out of the sky before you cause an international incident, because you clearly don't care."

"If that's a US fighter invading our airspace, then it's not me who's causing the incident," I said.

The jets were getting close enough I'd be able to see their markings myself in another minute. Terri kept circling around to the right. I could see what she was doing. If she came straight at the jets, they'd pass her by in an instant, and she'd never catch up with them. This way, she could wait for them to approach and then dovetail her way into their wake and catch them from behind.

"You're not one of my people, John, not officially, so I cannot give you an order. However, I'm asking you to use the utmost caution when dealing with these people. The last thing we need is to give Delta Prime an excuse to start a war with us."

"Point noted, Ricky. I'll be as careful as I can."

"See if you can do better than that."

I don't know if it was the telepathy, but he always sounded a lot more fun in person.

"They're coming up hard, John," Terri said.

I didn't need her to tell me that. They were zooming in so fast I thought they might smack into us.

The plane in front was a little commercial job, a Learjet, but the one coming up behind it was an F-15, which outclassed it just about every way. I don't know if the Learjet had been souped up with delta powers or if the Eagle pilot was just dogging it on purpose, but under most circumstances, the fighter would have been able to fly rings around that civilian transport.

As the planes got closer, I saw tracer fire licking out of the Gatling gun mounted under the F-15's wing. Since Terri had brought us out of the direct line between the jets, the bullets didn't get anywhere near us. While the plasma running through my skin might have kept those slugs from killing me, Terri wouldn't have been so lucky. If one of those bullets tagged her, I'd have a long dive ahead of me.

"They're shooting at them, John!" Terri's horror-filled voice sounded just shy of a full-on scream.

"Get me closer to them," I said over my shoulder at her, "but keep out of the line of fire."

She did just as I asked. Meanwhile, the Learjet jinked left and right to try to avoid the bullets. The damn thing just wasn't built for dogfighting though. Without help, it didn't stand a chance.

I let the plasma build in my fists until it hurt. Then I pointed my fists at the F-15 and shouted to Terri. "Hold on!"

## CHAPTER FOUR

*SEPTEMBER 4, 1999: PATRIOT*

Most times when I fire my plasma blasts, I have my feet square on the ground. There's a bit of a kick from them, so I lean in the direction I'm blasting so I don't knock myself off balance. It's not just embarrassing in the middle of a fight — it can be fatal.

I didn't have that luxury there, a few thousand feet in the air with nothing to brace myself against but Terri's arms. I just hoped she wouldn't lose her grip, and I let fly with my blast.

I didn't want to kill the pilot in the jet fighter. He was just a good soldier trying to do his job, much like I'd once been back in my Delta Squadron days. Still, I couldn't let him shoot down the Learjet either. I didn't know who might be on it, but if they were heading for Isla Delta, I had to assume they were deltas on the run. I inched my aim high at the last second and fired my shot across the F-15's nose.

I didn't see what happened then because the recoil from the blast knocked me out of Terri's arms.

I can't say I blame her for that. She'd already hauled my carcass thousands of feet into the air, and tough as she was her arms had to be getting tired. Add a kick from a double-fisted plasma blast into that, and it's no wonder she couldn't hold on to me.

That didn't mean I wasn't in terrible trouble though.

I'd gone through paratrooper training in Delta Squadron for situations exactly like this. It had been decades since I'd leaped out of a perfectly good aircraft, though, and found myself flailing

through the air. It's amazing how fast those lessons come back to you though when your life is on the line.

I kicked the terror out of mind as soon as I could, and I stopped flapping my arms. That was only going to make me keep spinning through the air. While what I did on my way down to the water might not make much difference in the long run, I still had hope, and I clung to it like a drowning man tossed a fishing line. It wasn't much, but it was all I had.

I straightened my arms and legs out into the standard X-shaped formation and brought myself into a flat dive that put me parallel with the ground. That gave me as much wind resistance as I could muster and slowed me down a bit. Better yet, it stabilized me so that if and when Terri came around to grab me, she'd have a shot at doing it without getting clobbered across the skull by a spinning arm or leg.

I tried to crane my head back to see what was happening above me, but the wind rushing past my face made it damn hard to see anything but the water zooming up toward me. Knowing how much pain I was in for when I hit it kept my attention focused on it too.

I wondered if it would really hurt all that much. At that speed, I expected the impact would knock me unconscious or dead almost instantly, even with my plasma-toughened skin. That might be able to protect me from a bullet, but this involved a lot more mass hitting me at once.

I didn't know if a water landing from this height would really be like hitting concrete, but I supposed it wouldn't make a damn bit of difference if it knocked me out and left me floating dozens of feet below the ocean's surface. Drowning would kill me fast enough.

Either way, I didn't really want to find out.

"Terri!" I said as loud as I could manage. "A little help here!"

A moment later, I felt something soft and warm smack into me from behind. Terri grabbed me tight and wrapped her arms around my chest with all her might, locking one hand over the opposite wrist to make sure that this time she wouldn't let go.

"I got you!" she said into my ear. "Brace yourself!"

“For what?” I wanted to say, but I never got the chance.

Grabbing me was one thing. Stopping my downward momentum was something else entirely.

It felt like she was trying to hug me to death. Under most circumstances, I might have laughed something like that off. Hell, I might have enjoyed it. But then and there, it hurt, and worse than that, I worried that it might hurt her just as much — enough that she might not be able to hold on.

I grabbed onto her arms myself and held them as tight as I could, lending my strength to hers. She screamed out loud and hard in pain and frustration and even desperation, and I joined in on that too.

For a long, horrible moment, I thought for sure I’d pull her into the drink along with me, killing us both. I wondered at one point if she’d have to let me go — and if I’d be able to let her do that in time.

Then I felt our descent slow, and I realized that Terri had not just been pulling me up but pushing us forward. That turned it from a tug-of-war with gravity to a more natural flying angle, a dive that we could pull out of if we had enough time, and she’d bought us plenty.

Next thing I knew, we were angling toward the sky once again, faster than ever. Terry had used the momentum from our dive to swing us upward, and that added to the effects of her delta powers. We were moving so fast that the speed left me struggling for breath.

As we zipped higher, I spotted the F-15 coming up hard behind the Learjet, peppering it with its Gatling gun again. The passenger plane already had smoke billowing out of one of its engines. It was diving for Isla Delta and had come down almost to our level already.

I could tell that the fighter pilot was just playing with Learjet though. If he’d wanted to shoot down the plane, he could have done it already.

“John!” Ricky’s voice echoed in my head. “Those are our people in that plane, at least a dozen deltas from Crescent City, on the run from Delta Prime.”

“What the hell do you want me to do about it?” I asked.

“You’re all we’ve got up there, my friend. If you can manage it,

shoot that bastard down!”



## CHAPTER FIVE

*SEPTEMBER 4, 1999: PATRIOT*

“Get me a good angle on that fighter!” I said to Terri.

“Are you trying to kill us?” she said. “Again?”

“We don’t take him out, he’s going to kill everyone on that plane!”

Terri groaned in my ear. Maybe she considered dumping me there in the ocean and saving herself. She could have gone back and just told everyone I’d slipped. Nothing to it.

But she held on. She didn’t say a word. She just started into an attack angle on the F-15 without another word of argument.

I concentrated on pumping plasma into my clenched fists. I wasn’t sure if I’d knock myself back out of Terri’s arms again — which had to be aching worse than ever — but I didn’t much care. If it meant I could save a plane full of people, I was willing to take that chance.

“Closer!” I said. “I’m only going to get one shot at this.”

I heard her grunt as she put everything she had into pushing us faster and faster. She had to be exhausted, I knew, and I was forcing her past any kind of limits she might have thought she had. She wanted to save these people as much as I did.

Just a little closer. I didn’t want to take too long. If I did, I might miss my shot altogether. But if I fired from here, I wasn’t sure I’d hit the fighter, and I couldn’t afford the time I’d need to recharge.

“I’m losing it!” Terri’s voice rasped in my ear, pained and raw. “I can’t keep this up!”

“Just a few more seconds!” I said. “Line me up!”

She did just that, and I raised my arms to aim my blast. As I did, I saw that I couldn't hold on to Terri any longer. It was up to her not to drop me — again. But I didn't have any choice in the matter anyhow.

This time, instead of holding me under my arms, Terri kept her grip around her chest and turned herself — and me along with her — straight up in the air. This slowed us down, but it also made us far more stable. It also meant that when I fired, I'd be shoved back against her, and her mass would help absorb the recoil.

Smart lady.

As we reached the apex of the little haul-up maneuver of Terri's, everything seemed to come to a halt for a moment. The wind didn't rush past me anymore, and I didn't have to fight it. I could just do what I came there for in that precious instant of tranquility.

I pointed at the F-15's tail and fired a blast straight up its exhaust.

As I let it loose, I saw the missile detach from the bottom of the F-15. I cursed the timing. If I'd fired just a little earlier, I might have stopped it. If I'd waited a few more seconds, I might have been able to try to blast the missile from the sky instead. As it was, I couldn't do a damn thing about it but watch.

My plasma blast smashed straight through the F-15 and caught it smack in its fuel tank. A moment later, The fighter exploded in an intense ball of orange flame so hot that it made me flinch from even as far away as we hung in the air.

Before that happened, though, that damn missile rocketed free. It loosed from its launching bracket and had maybe a second of free fall before its engine kicked in and shot it off toward the Learjet.

I don't know if the people in the plane had any idea what was coming. Maybe they saw the F-15 go up in a mighty explosion. They might have cheered for its demise, sensing now that nothing stood between them and a safe landing at Isla Delta's tiny excuse of an airstrip.

All Terri and I could do was watch as the missile zipped its way toward them. The pilot waggled the Learjet's wings as us once, as if to say thank you for destroying the F-15 that had been hounding

them.

Then the missile hit. It struck the Learjet in the rear, near where the stiff white wings met up with the rest of the craft. It blew that wing right off with a sharp and heart-rending explosion.

The plane went into a flat spin then and tumbled toward the sea below. I had little doubt that there were people alive in there all the way until the end.

The aircraft cartwheeled into the ocean, breaking apart as it did. Both wings came off, and the main cabin crumpled then tore in half. A moment later, it had sunk beneath the waves.

“Get down there!” I shouted to Terri.

She sobbed in my ear. She’d done a great job keeping hold of me this time, but it hadn’t done those people in the plane a lick of good. I could see how that could crush your soul, but we didn’t have time for that right now.

“Nobody could have survived that!” she said. “Nobody!”

“It was full of deltas!” I stabbed a finger down toward the wreckage. “We have no idea what their powers are. Someone might have made it!”

“That’s insane!” Despite the disbelief in her tone, she started diving toward the spot where the plane had gone down.

I scanned the ocean’s surface for any sign of survivors. Some deltas were nearly invulnerable. They might have survived such a fall. Others — like Lisa, who I’d left on the beach with Street — could come back from the dead. Of course, even that wouldn’t do them much good if they were trapped inside the plane’s fuselage at the bottom of the ocean.

Most deltas were just as mortal as anyone, though, and I knew the chances of them surviving the plane crash were tiny at best. Still, we couldn’t just fly away. We had to try.

We had to try.

## CHAPTER SIX

*SEPTEMBER 4, 1999: LISA*

I don't think I've ever felt so helpless, and for me, that's saying a lot. I mean, sure, I'm a delta, but my power is to be able to come back from the dead. I'm not exactly knocking out bank robbers with that.

Don't get me wrong. I'm glad to have any delta power at all, and mine has proven to be useful more than once. I'd be dead several times over already if I didn't have it, so I don't want it to sound like I'm complaining.

I am, just not about that. After all, Isla Delta is an island full of deltas — I hear there are over a thousand of us — every one of which has some kind of amazing power. But none of us could do anything to stop that plane full of people from spinning into the Caribbean and falling to pieces.

Of course, we're just deltas, not alphas. I mean, if Superior had been here, he might have been able to stop it. He'd have zapped that fighter jet out of the sky with his laser vision before it even got close to the plane full of Defiants. And even if that pilot had gotten a missile off, he'd have been able to chase it down and stop it. And if he hadn't been able to manage that, he could have grabbed the plane out of midair as it fell and brought it back to earth safe and sound.

Of course, he wasn't here. I didn't know what to make of that. I knew he couldn't be everywhere at once, but I figured after we'd seen him in Denver that he'd be make some kind of public return

and put everything right again. It just never happened — at least not yet.

Until that moment, I'd thought that maybe we could just get along without him. We'd been doing it ever since 1976, after all, and we were still kicking. I didn't have any reason to suspect that might change — especially not like that.

Someone down the beach, farther in from shore, screamed when the plane hit the water, and I didn't know if she was ever going to stop. I felt like either slapping her or joining her. Instead, I put my arms around Street and held him tight.

"It's okay," he said in a soothing voice that only held the barest of trembles. "It's over."

I put my head against his bare chest. "It's the farthest thing from okay," I said. "And I don't think this means it's over either. It's only just beginning."

Street had never been one to sit and watch from the sidelines. As guests rather than residents of Isla Delta though, we didn't have any idea what we could do to help or even where we were supposed to be. Still, that didn't stop him.

"Come on."

He took me by the hand and started trotting up the beach toward the complex of guest villas where we'd been housed. I'd been staying in my own apartment, while he'd been assigned a place with Patriot, right next door to mine. The Franklins were on the other side, at least until they found more a more permanent place. They were planning to make this their home, while the rest of us still planned on leaving before long.

"Where are we going?"

He just kept moving, faster now. "That new vehicle I've been rigging up."

Street was a genius when it came to machines. That was his delta power. He could make them do impossible things. It took plenty of work, but the results were amazing.

He'd spent just about every evening in his villa's garage, working on some new project. I'd seen it a few times — usually when I

stopped by to join the guys for dinner or to take Street for a stroll down the beach, which was mostly abandoned at night — but it was in so many pieces I could barely recognize it as anything but some kind of transport.

“Is it ready?” I said. “I thought you wanted another week before you were going to even test it?”

“Under optimal circumstances, sure,” he said. “We don’t have those anymore, so we have to adjust. It’s how it works.”

“How what works?”

He gave me a forced grin I’m sure was meant to reassure me but didn’t. “Life.”

When we got to the villas, he went straight to the garage attached to his place and flung the roll-down door up. Inside, I saw that he had made a lot of progress on his craft. It looked like a cross between a boat and a helicopter, a bit like one of those seaplanes people used to fly around the islands all the time, but far sleeker.

“Will it work?” I cast a dubious eye at it. It had so many holes in it that it looked like putting it in the water would just be an excuse to watch it sink.

“Well enough for a rescue effort,” he said as he set about taking the craft down off the blocks he had jacked it onto. “I’d been planning to outfit it as a submarine too for sneaking back into the US, but I haven’t gotten to that part yet. This old guy named Fred has been lending me a hand with it, though, and we’ve made some huge steps forward.”

I wanted to help out, but I didn’t know what I could do other than get in the way. I tried to offer Street what aid I could, but he just waved me off without a word. He had that intense look he gets on his face when he’s thinking about something serious and hard. It’s like he’s only part there, the rest of him tackling the whatever puzzle he’s picked up and decided to wrestle with today.

I watched him work. He used smooth, efficient moves, executed in perfectly planned order, not a single step wasted. He knew what he needed to do, and he set about doing it as well and as fast as he could. I had to admire that.

The phone rang then, and I jumped up and ran for it, happy to have something to do other than watch someone else work. I found the cordless handset in the kitchen, on the sill of the window that looked out over the ocean. It was Truth on the other end of the line.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

*SEPTEMBER 4, 1999: LISA*

"Patriot?" Truth said. "I need to speak to John Cruise, right now."

She sounded panicked, which threw me off. I'd heard the woman speak dozens of times by then, and I had never heard her be anything but calm and collected. Sure, she could be urgent when the situation called for it, but not like this. I could hear the fear weaved into her tone.

"It's Lisa."

"I need John."

"He's busy right now. We just had a plane crash out in the ocean." I looked out the window in front of me, and I could see the place where the plane had gone down beneath the glittering surface of the sea. Every bit of it had disappeared beneath the waves now.

I could see a few specks floating in the air, and I wondered who they might be. Did Patriot and his friend that he'd flown off with survive? Did one of the passengers on the plane manage to get out before the plane went down? From so far away, I just couldn't tell.

"You just what?"

I squinted out over the water again. The sun still hung high in the sky like nothing had happened at all. If I couldn't still hear the sirens going off in the distance, I might think nothing had gone wrong today at all.

"I guess it was shot down, actually, by a fighter."

Truth gasped in horror. "Has it started already?"



“What are you talking about?” I walked toward the garage. “It’s already over. Patriot shot down the fighter jet.”

“How did he manage — Never mind.” She sighed. “It’s Patriot. I don’t need to know.”

“You don’t think that’s important?”

Truth snorted. “I think it’s spectacular, in the original sense of the word, but it’s not germane to what I’m calling about. Well, tangentially, sure, but whatever John managed to pull off, I’m sure even he can’t replicate it dozens of times over.”

I stopped in the doorway of the garage. Street almost had his machine ready to go. He was just giving it the final inspection to make sure she’d be seaworthy.

But I didn’t care. I felt my blood run cold as I guessed the reason why Truth sounded so frightened. “Why would he have to do that?”

“Because there’s an invasion force on its way to Isla Delta right now,” she said. “And you all need to get the hell out of there before it arrives.”

I almost dropped the phone. Instead, I just held it out at arm’s length and stared at it for a moment.

“Lisa?” I could hear Truth even at that distance. “Lisa?”

I put the phone back to my ear with one hand and massaged my forehead with the other. It felt like my brain might try to burst out of it. “How? I mean, who? I mean, what are we supposed to do?”

“Braintrust got me the skinny on it. He says that this has been in the works for at least a week.”

“It’s the US?” I couldn’t believe my own country was trying to kill me. “The Army?”

“The Navy and Marines, actually,” Truth said. “And the front edge of their force should be there soon.”

I knew that the US government was trouble for deltas like me, but I’d focused most of my distrust on Delta Prime, which seemed to spend a lot of time and effort trying to bring people like me in for trumped up crimes. When it came to the military, I just hadn’t considered it much.

“Can they do that?” I asked. “Attack US citizens whenever they

want?"

"You're not in the US, Lisa. You're the guests of a rogue government unrecognized by the United States, which has classified every resident of the island as terrorists. The President will go on the air in a few minutes to announce this to the world."

"Are you kidding me?"

Street shot me a curious look. "The US Navy is invading Isla Delta," I told him.

He dropped the tool he had in his hand. It clattered on the concrete floor. "When?"

"Now."

"He's going to call it a pre-emptive act to protect US interests and security both at home and abroad," Truth said.

"Doesn't Congress have to sign off on that at least?" I asked. "That's an act of war. Even if they don't recognize Isla Delta, what about Costa Rica?"

"They haven't had a standing military since 1949. You have more firepower in the hands of the deltas on Isla Delta than Costa Rica has in its entire country."

"So we're their defense program?" I felt like I might choke. I'd met the people of Isla Delta. They seemed more like beach bums, fishermen, and barflies than soldiers. If that's who we were relying on for protection, we were doomed.

"Such as it is," Truth said. "How long until you can get me Patriot?"

Street had climbed into the driver's seat of his contraption. He waved me over into the seat next to him, and I hopped in. He put out his hand for the phone, and I gave it to him.

"We're on our way to see what's happened with Patriot right now," he said. "How long until the invasion?"

The color left his face as he listened to the reply, but his jaw remained set and determined. "Then we'll just have to haul ass," he said.

He thumbed the phone off and pitched it back through the open door into the villa. Then he reached down and started the machine

we were sitting in. The gull-wing doors came down over the passenger compartment and the horizontal rotors that stabbed out from the four corners of the thing spun to life.

We gently rose into the air then, just a few feet above the ground, and glided out of the open garage. We spent two seconds on the road leading up to the villas before Street pointed the craft toward the ocean and we struck out over the open and now-deserted beach instead.

“How long do we have?” I asked.

“Not nearly long enough.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

*SEPTEMBER 4, 1999: PATRIOT*

I spent a lot of time in that water, and I didn't find a single person alive in it. Some of the cushions and luggage and whatever came bobbing to the top, but not a single person.

I knew it was a fool's errand when I leaped into the drink. I dove down as far as I could, stayed there until the air in my lungs gave out, and then raced for the surface. I never saw any living thing other than a passing school of fish, and even they looked scared out of their mind.

Much of the ocean floor directly around Isla Delta is fairly shallow, but that only lasts for a little ways before there's a huge drop-off. The plane had come down near what I had thought to be the edge of that drop-off, but when I got into the water I saw that I had been wrong.

The waters just seemed to go on forever, far deeper than I could possibly see. The plane had sunk somewhere down there, and I'm sure had hit the bottom by now, but if so, no one else would be coming out of it.

After ten or fifteen minutes of flailing around in the water, I gave up. I found a large suitcase floating in the waves and crawled on top of it to rest. I felt awful that the owner would never be able to claim it.

Terri hovered there in the air over me. She'd been running passes around the area from above, trying to spot something from her

higher vantage point. "Any luck?" I asked her.

She shook her head. "You neither?"

I shook my head too.

"I think the pilot of that fighter might have ejected before his plane exploded though," she said. "If that makes you feel any better."

I grimaced as I clung to the luggage. "Not much."

"At least you're not a killer. Not today."

I stared up at the sky. "Day's still young yet."

We hung there for a bit, she in the air and me in the water. For all that had happened — for all the noise the rockets and explosions and crashes had made — the silence now seemed terrible. Even the air-raid sirens on the island had quit, and the only sounds I could hear were that of the ocean's gentle waves and the seagulls circling overhead.

"Why haven't they come out here yet?" Terri said after a while. "Where are the rescue boats?"

"They've got their hands full already," I said. "Ricky popped into my head for an update while I was underwater. He knows there's no one alive out here but us." I waved my hand toward the island. "And maybe that pilot."

"You're not worried about him?"

"After what he did today, drowning's too good for him." I spat the salty taste out of my mouth. "If he did get free, his ejector seat would have a parachute for him. He had enough altitude to make it to the island."

She stared down at me from her dry perch in the wind rushing over the waves. "And that's not a problem?"

"Are you ready to head in yet?"

She lay flat out in the air as if she were lying on the beach, and she looked down and narrowed her eyes at me. "What are you keeping from me, John?"

I'd known Terri a long time. I'd helped get her out of Crescent City about a decade back, and I'd put her on the Delta Railroad that brought her down here. I'd tried to catch up with her every time

since then that I'd gotten to Isla Delta.

She'd grown comfortable here, just like everyone else who lived on the island. It was a slice of paradise in so many ways, not just because of the weather and the warmth that I often longed for in the middle of those Crescent City winters. It was one of the few places on the face of the planet where deltas could not only feel safe but also be themselves, able to use their powers freely and openly without fear of being thrown into jail or even just sending the neighbors running for the hills.

It had gained all that by way of its isolation though. It was easy for the governments of the world — anyone with power, really — to ignore Isla Delta because the people who lived there were so far away from anyone else. What happened here rarely had an impact on anywhere else in the world, so why would anyone care much about it?

That isolation brought with it a certain amount of insulation. The people of Isla Delta weren't citizens of the world. They stuck to themselves and hoped that the rest of the planet would just leave them alone.

That had worked just fine for decades, but Isla Delta's luck had just run out, and I didn't know how to break it to Terri. How do you tell someone that their home is about to be destroyed? I did it the only way I knew how: straight up and honest.

"That fighter wasn't an aberration, Terri. It was a scout, an advance force if you like."

She furrowed her tanned brow at me and gave me a disbelieving stare. "What do you mean?"

"The President has ordered an invasion of Isla Delta. The US military is on its way, probably with Delta Squadron in the lead."

I looked toward the island. I saw Street's crazy hovercraft that he'd been working on come scudding out over the waves, heading right for us. I hoped he had Lisa with him.

I turned back to Terri. She was floating nearer now, close enough to touch. I reached up and wiped away the tears welling up in her eyes.

“Oh, John,” she said. “What are we going to do?”

I gave her a helpless shrug. “Isla Delta is over. We do whatever comes next.”

“And what’s that?”

I stared off at the horizon to the north. I thought I could see something moving there — maybe several somethings — coming toward the island, fast.

“Fight or flee,” I said. “Fight or flee.”