

PROLOGUE

“Holes in Reality”

April 20, 2132

The weather had cleared and spring had at once started to show its beauty, so it seemed like a good idea for 10-year-old Harlan Ule to go to the park and get together with his friends for a pickup game of hexaball. His parents, mindful that he always get enough exercise, encouraged the pursuit, even though they more than once cast doubts on Harlan's ability to 'go pro', which he'd also more than once claimed.

His father dropped him off at the local park in his flier, which also became a ground car in some way Harlan had never ceased to be amazed at. He rounded up some of the other kids to begin the game and had staked out a court for their use. Hexaball required six players, a correctly colored court in the shape of a hexagon, and a hexaball that could change to one of six colors depending on how hard it bounced. Harlan had become much better at matching the bounce to the color of the hexagon, making others miss the ball and causing a 'rotation', or a move clockwise of players around the court, to occur. He had so much fun, and improved his game so much this afternoon, that he barely registered it when his father's flier landed in the flier-approved spot, and both his parents exited it to make their way over to him.

Harlan begged. "Let me finish this round only. I almost scored enough to win." His parents, while seeming somewhat frustrated, nevertheless acquiesced.

But the game did not continue. Instead, a series of bright flashes nearly blinded Harlan just as he'd turned the ball black and sent it to the white hex. He forgot all about the game and shielded his eyes. Then, he heard something.

He turned to the noise, fighting to regain his vision. When he did, he realized his mother was screaming at the top of her lungs, and around him, kids were scattering. His father held his mother, both in shock as they stared at the sight before and around them.

Holes in the air had opened up around the park, by the brook that flowed nearby, in the front yards of houses, and in the middle of streets for as far as Harlan could see. Through these jagged tears in space, hanging there as if some god or power had ripped apart reality itself, now streamed countless giants.

Harlan couldn't process; he stood there on the court, frozen in disbelief. What he saw before him couldn't be real.

The beings coming through the tears in reality stood eight feet tall or even some as tall as ten. They had human features; except for their height, their ears being much larger in proportion to their heads, their odd skin colors, and the third eye in the middle of each being's forehead, they could have been human. These 'Otherbeings' made no announcements or attempts to communicate. Instead, they brought large devices to their shoulders, aimed them like guns at targets in front of them, and beams of white hot energy issued forth. Whatever the beams caught, they disintegrated between the beginning and the end of their lengths as they lost effectiveness somewhere in the distance.

It was in this way that Harlan Ule watched his parents die when one of these beams cut them down where they stood. Another sliced through and shook the court around him and the earth beneath it, bringing up a spray of dirt and stone in the process, as if struck by a sudden earthquake. Harlan, not knowing what else to do, crawled into a hole the beam had created in the ground to hide.

He didn't know how long he hid there. Around him, as he lay curled up in the fetal position with his hands over his ears, the world came down. He refused to look; he'd squeezed his eyes shut, but he could feel the heat from the fires all around, could still hear screams through his palms, and could most of all smell ash, sulfur, and roasting everywhere.

Any second, he expected one of the beams to fry him, or for one of the otherworldly monsters to reach into his hiding place, pluck him out and crush him like a bug. Nothing like that happened, instead, as he waited he began to notice that the screaming had died down. He also registered the loud cracks of gunfire, and the booms, followed by the blow of shockwaves from the explosions. This gave him some hope that at least someone had decided to fight back.

He risked a look, peeking out of one eye. The view of Seattle he had from this park on a hill in the suburbs had changed from one of a peaceful, normal Saturday afternoon into fire and chaos. All he could see of the city usually when looking in this direction had been blocked by fires and thick smoke. He closed his eyes again, and had to stifle a cough as the smoke drew closer. He didn't feel the heat of the fires growing, so he figured he'd be okay for the moment. If it got worse, his young mind realized he'd have to move or risk burning to death.

After he knew not how long, he heard more gunshots, and human voices, adults he didn't recognize. He couldn't make out the words through all the noise. More gunshots followed, and then a ragged cheer went up.

Silence, but for the distant sounds of battle, took over for the space of another few moments, and then he heard someone coming.

He opened his eyes again to look around and took his hands off his ears. He saw a group of human-sized figures, adults by their heights, approaching his hiding spot through the smoke, as if they'd already seen him.

When they'd come close enough to make eye contact, he realized they had indeed seen him. He also realized these were just people from the neighborhood, not soldiers. They'd gathered any guns they could find and had started to fight back however they could.

The leader of the group, a tall man with a severe haircut, muscular, middle-aged and with the bearing of someone who'd had military training and held leadership positions, looked down directly at Harlan.

"How long have you been here, kid?" the man asked him.

"I don't. . . I don't know," Harlan stammered in return. "My mom and dad. They're gone. . ."

"We have to help him," a woman in the group said to the man who'd first spoken. "Colonel, we can at least get him to safety until the military arrives. You said they're coming, right?"

The Colonel whipped his head to the woman and snapped back, "Of course they're coming! Pick him up. Once we find a working flier we can get to the mountains. It'll be safer there. I'm positive."

Harlan, though relieved to see someone in control of the situation, still crawled backward into the earth around him when the woman handed her gun to a young man next to her, knelt down in front of him and reached out her hand. Inside, he knew these people meant no harm, but after all that had happened that afternoon, he didn't know what to think anymore.

"I'm Martine DeBeau," the woman said. Harlan simply stared back at her face. She had wide, dark eyes, olive dark skin, wore a hunting vest over a t-shirt, and form-fitting black leggings. A thought occurred to him that this might be his one chance at escape. He took her hand and let her help him to his feet.

Once upright again, he started to brush dirt and grass from his clothes. He tried not to look around too much, realizing perhaps subconsciously that the bodies of his parents could still be nearby.

“We need to get moving,” the Colonel said. “Can’t stay here too long. Sammy, look around and see if any of those fliers can work.”

On the word of the Colonel, a short, sandy-haired boy, barely out of his teenage years, and looking much worse for wear due to the plump around his middle, started over to the parking spots. Harlan watched him go, but didn’t see if his parents’ flier had made it through the assault before Martine brought his attention back to her.

“Kid, what’s your name?” she inquired.

“Harlan Ule,” he answered. He looked back to Sammy and saw that while suffering some exterior damage, his father’s flier had not taken a direct hit.

“Try my dad’s flier,” he said. “Tell him. I don’t know about the keys; they’re here somewhere, I guess.”

“Well, don’t you worry about a thing, Harlan Ule. Your big sister, Martine, is going to take such good care of you now,” said Martine. She gestured to Sammy to make sure he understood the flier to take.

“It won’t fit everyone,” Harlan said. “It only seats five. With me, there’s seven.”

“Don’t be silly, Harlan,” Martine said. “We have to make it work.”

“Found them!” Sammy held the keys up as he stood up, the smoke parting in front of him while he walked the short distance back to the group. “But yeah. . .”

Harlan didn’t know exactly why Sammy cut off there, but the way he said it made him think of before, and of watching the white-hot beam cutting through the air, through trees, and through people, and through. . .

“Let’s go, crew,” the Colonel ordered. “Everyone inside the flier. I haven’t seen their air power yet, but rest assured it’s coming. This could be our one chance.”

Sammy opened the doors of the craft and then handed the keys to the Colonel. Martine had Harlan sit on her lap in the front passenger bucket seat, and the other four, whose names Harlan didn’t yet know except for Sammy, climbed into the back, arranging themselves however they could. No one bothered to strap in.

The Colonel started the engine and the rotors underneath the flier hummed to life. The lift off proved rocky at first and the Colonel almost tipped them over, but regained control quickly enough to right the tilt. When he’d reached enough altitude to be clear of the treetops and rooftops in the Seattle suburbs, he engaged the rear rotors and they flew off at top speed.

“Fuel’s looking low,” the Colonel reported after another moment. “I hope it’s enough to get us out of this. We got to run now, but it’s temporary. We’ll get them. I’m sure of it.”

Overhead, as Harlan looked out the front windshield of the flier, he spotted a group of dark blotches on the horizon. Then, he began to hear them, as did all in the civilian flier. At a higher altitude, a formation of stealth aircraft advanced on them, then passed over them, appearing to take no notice or threat from the civilian flier.

They flew on, letting the dark blotches pass overhead with no action or comment, but Harlan heard the sounds of distant explosions from behind. He craned his neck far enough back to see pieces of some of the military aircraft falling to the ground in balls of flame. He couldn’t see what had caused the damage.

“Keep it together, crew,” the Colonel implored them. “They’re busy with them, so they might just ignore us.”

A few more minutes of flight and the mountains came into clearer view in the distance. Harlan wanted desperately to ask how much fuel remained, but he figured the Colonel had it all under control.

At last, they reached the mountains and valleys of the Rockies. Harlan caught a glint of late afternoon sunlight reflected among the forests below the treeline of the peaks.

Harlan pointed. “Look there, Colonel.”

The Colonel squinted at the spot Harlan had pointed out. “Could be a building. Maybe a getaway cabin. That’s usually what they are, up here. I’ll take us in closer, but we’re almost empty, so whatever it is, we’re going to land in a few minutes regardless. We might as well put it down there. Everyone get ready.”

Around him, the ragtag group checked their weapons and steeled themselves for whatever they might encounter. The Colonel slowed the flier on approach, and when they’d reached the edge of the property the building lay on, he hovered over the evergreen trees for a few moments to survey the area.

It appeared to be the house of a wealthy person. Oddly it had been built into the side of a cliff; the front of it, full of large, floor-to-roof windows that faced the west, jutted out from the recess of the cliffside like it had been pushed inside, and ached to be free once more from the darkened rock. The siding and feel, from the outside, resembled that of a log cabin, though it was obvious

from the out buildings, one marked with a 'high voltage' sign, that his house had more to it than what they could see.

Satisfied, the Colonel put the flier down on the pavement at the top of the one gravel road that led to the place. Slowly, and with caring, they exited the craft with guns drawn. They spread out, keeping in sight and earshot of one another.

Harlan declined to come out at first after Martine had asked him to follow her. When he refused, she shrugged and said he'd better just watch the flier for now; so, he agreed.

He watched as the rest of the group poked their heads into every outbuilding, eager to determine just what this place had been built for. After a few minutes, though, his curiosity got the better of him and he climbed out to look around.

First, he went to where the Colonel had just come out of the outbuilding with the high voltage sign on its door. The Colonel looked him up and down as Harlan approached.

"Looks like these generators could still work," the Colonel informed him when he'd gotten close. "What do you think, kid. Should we make this home? Seems like the owners haven't been here in some time. Maybe they'll never return."

"It's not our house," Harlan said matter-of-factly. "Can we even stay? What will we eat?"

"We'll figure it out," Martine said, coming up behind and to one side of Harlan. "There's food inside. I checked it out with Gregor and JessiAnn."

"I've got kids," the Colonel said. "But now, until I find mine, or they find me again, you can all be like my kids. We'll stay here. We'll keep a low profile. I'll raise you all as mine, just until things get better and settle down again. My group of kids, teenagers, all you are much younger than I am. I'll keep track of you. I'll train you how to fight, how to survive, and maybe it can still be a good life. I have no idea how many of those monsters there are, or how many places they came through, but together we can figure it out. There's billions of us on this planet and they can't have killed everyone."

"Colonel," Martine said. "You're right. I'm the oldest here besides you, and I'm only twenty-two. JessiAnn can't be more than fifteen. Sammy is around the same age, or a little older. Gregor too. But we'll do our best."

"Just turned seventy last week," the Colonel said. He shouldered his gun, some type of rifle from what Harlan could tell. "Such a strange late birthday

present this day has been. Well, we're all tired and have seen enough today. Let's get everyone inside. We'll scrounge up some food and light candles if they're to be found, a small fire out here otherwise. Then, we rest. I'll take first watch. Martine can cover second."

"But Colonel," Harlan protested. "What will you do about it if they come here?"

The Colonel shrugged. "If that happens, nothing we can do but use the rest of our ammo to fight back. But I have a feeling we're safe, at least for now."

"What can we call this place?" Martine asked. "We're lucky to find it, but I hope the owners don't find us. It looks like one of those bunkers, almost, that wealthy people used to set up. They aren't here that anyone has seen, right? Guess it didn't do them any good to build this place, if someone else found it first."

Harlan brightened up a bit then, and for the first time since being rescued from the park and the chaos there, he risked a brief smile. "I've got an idea. Let's call it Home Base."

The Colonel chuckled and ruffled Harlan's dark brown hair. "Home Base it is, kid. Now let's get us some grub."

