

# CHAPTER ONE

**T**he pursuit had gone on for longer and farther than any other in the Ultra Being's experience.

The creature he was chasing, a particularly vicious brute calling itself Bemular, wasn't the first monster to make a break for it but it was an unexpectedly adept pilot. Their starting point had been in an area of the galaxy where the stars were so numerous and so close together that total darkness was virtually unknown, and continued all the way to the ragged edge of the Milky Way. Beyond that lay the pitiless black void of intergalactic space, where even advanced sentient lifeforms could die of loneliness.

The Ultra's quarry wasn't looking to die, and certainly not like that. After the long chase, Bemular needed to find a place where it could remain hidden long enough to replenish its energy. But the odds of finding anything like that in this part of the galaxy weren't good. The interplanetary systems

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were fewer and farther between, and the small percentage of inhabited worlds among them weren't developed enough for Contact. The Ultras scrupulously observed galactic quarantine for the well-being of the lifeforms involved. Monsters, however, didn't care about anyone's well-being.

Scans showed the Ultra that within a planetary system orbiting an unremarkable G-star, there was a small, rocky but water-rich planet with abundant resources that could easily be extracted and converted to energy. It was the best option for a monster in a hurry. Bemular's blue Travel Sphere dived into its atmosphere and the Ultra dived right in after—and then discovered the monster's best option put him at a disadvantage.

The inhabitants of this world weren't Beings of Light—far from it. For them, most forms of radiation were harmful, even lethal. The planet's atmosphere filtered out the most dangerous kinds, which had allowed for the emergence of carbon-based life in quite a profusion of forms, from single-cell organisms and basic vegetation all the way up to individual vertebrates capable of abstract thought.

Current environmental conditions weren't ideal. It was a densely populated world and such a high concentration of discrete intelligent beings kicked up a lot of pollution, of all kinds—light and sound as well as particulate. Bemular would have no trouble surviving under those conditions but for the Ultra, it meant a sharp reduction in the amount of available energy. And Bemular was no fool—it had gone directly to the night-side of the planet, where there would be even less power to draw on. The Ultra had to redistribute

the various feeds just to keep the Travel Sphere in flight.

Normally redistribution was performed at a much lower velocity, not while chasing a monster through an unfamiliar environment. The Ultra vowed that the pursuit would end here, on this small, obscure planet and, if at all possible, without endangering any of the indigenous life, including the ones gathered at the edge of an inland body of water.

The sight of Bemular's Travel Sphere stirred them all up and put them in an agitated state of avid curiosity but it was clear they had no flying vehicles among themselves. Which was very fortunate—pursuing Bemular in these conditions was hard enough without having to worry about dodging inquisitive airborne natives.

Agent Shin Hayata of the Science Special Search Party, aka the SSSP, or simply the Science Patrol, had chased his share of UFOs through the night sky. Some had turned out to be phantoms and others had been more substantial, but he'd never had so much as a near miss with any of the latter. He was just too good a pilot.

The UFO *du jour* (or *de la nuit*) looked like a great big ball of blue light and flew like something too sophisticated to obey the laws of physics. It had darted around the treetops of Ryugamori Forest for a while as if it were searching for something. Then it had reached the lake, where it now seemed to be doing some impromptu aerobatics for a group of campers on the shore.

At first, he'd thought the UFO pilot was playing with the

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vessel's reflection just to show off. The campers had *ooohed* and *aaahed* excitedly at every tricky maneuver. Hayata was just as impressed as they were, although it also made him think of something his flight instructor had told him back when he'd been a new member of the Science Patrol and still in training to fly the fancy VTOLs:

*Son, there are old pilots and there are bold pilots, but there are no old, bold pilots. Decide which one you want to be so the rest of us can file the appropriate flight plan.*

Whoever was on the stick in that glowing blue ball either hadn't heard that bit of wisdom or put no stock in it. Either way, Hayata was going to have to stay extra alert if he wanted to end his shift in one piece. He called in to Headquarters to give them a status report and smiled when he heard the voice in his headphones.

'What's up, Hayata? You sound serious.'

Some things you could always count on, he thought; the sun always rose in the east, you could always find people camping at Lake Ryugamori, and when he called in to HQ, Akiko Fuji would answer. Life was good; not easy, but then, what fun would that be?

'I've got the UFO in sight over Lake Ryugamori,' Hayata told her. 'Looks like a glowing blue spotlight and the way it moves should be impossible. It's putting on quite a show for the campers.'

'Muramatsu here, Hayata,' the captain said, joining the conversation. 'Stay with it, see if you can get some idea of its structure. It's got to be made of something more substantial than light. We'll be out to back you up shortly.'

‘Copy that, Cap. Hayata out.’ He chuckled to himself. All the Science Patrol agents had come across some pretty strange things in the course of the job but a UFO made of light would be a first.

Captain Toshio Muramatsu was too restless to stay behind his desk in the Operations Center. Any time civilians were in close proximity to a UFO, it made him nervous. He made sure Fuji was recording everything that came in from Hayata, then checked on how Daisuke Arashi and Mitsuhiro Ide were doing with the map they’d put up on a glass-board.

Ryugamori Forest was the region’s largest wooded area and very popular with campers. Lately it had also been popular with strange lights in the sky; the number of reports had increased. Some had been spurious—city-folk not used to the great outdoors, who’d never seen a falling star—but others had involved some kind of genuine phenomenon or event witnessed by three or more people, most of whom were sober.

In any case, all calls about strange or suspicious activity had to be investigated and reports filed. If a report turned out to be a false alarm, that was all right with Muramatsu—no fault, no foul, no harm done, and no tears shed. Anything else was an open case they had to keep track of. Arashi and Ide had created the glass-board map to do exactly that, color-coding each case and marking the spot of first sighting, trajectory followed, and last known location, dated

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and time-stamped. The way things were going, Muramatsu suspected they were going to need extra glass-boards and a lot more colors.

Fuji had suggested they use the computer but both Arashi and Ide had balked. They preferred working with something they could physically touch, write on, and move around; it gave them a better feel for directions and distances. A computer screen was entirely too small, completely unworkable. Muramatsu told Fuji he was inclined to let them be. This was one of the very few things the two men had ever agreed on.

Both men were excellent Science Patrol agents—Arashi was fearless and his ability as a sharpshooter was practically supernatural, while Ide had a genius for invention and innovation. But Arashi also had a tendency to see things in stark black and white. By contrast, Ide was younger, less certain, not as serious or as self-possessed. The way Muramatsu saw it, they needed each other.

As Communications Officer, Fuji did more than simply respond to their calls in. She had a way of getting them to communicate with each other clearly and efficiently, which Muramatsu knew from his time as an astronaut was crucial to keeping a team functioning at their peak.

And then there was Hayata, who rounded them all out. He seemed to do everything right but was never arrogant about it, always treating his teammates with respect. He was level-headed, easygoing, slow to anger, and, best of all, he had a sense of humor, which was why Muramatsu had promoted him to his second-in-command and, in

Muramatsu's absence, acting CO. Arashi, Fuji, and Ide had accepted this without complaint or any sign of resentment or jealousy.

Muramatsu was relieved that they worked together as well as they did. He had been uncertain about taking this assignment after his years as an astronaut but so far, it was going well for everyone involved. His big concern at the moment, however, was this UFO Hayata was chasing. It was just a gut feeling but in Muramatsu's experience, there were times when the gut was smarter than the brain.

Fuji turned from the communications console to look at him, apprehension large on her young face. She had a way of picking up on how he was feeling—it was probably that talent for communicating, he thought. He gave her what he hoped was a reassuring nod and she nodded back at him, but her expression was no less anxious as she turned back to the console.

Hayata flew a wide circle around the glowing blue sphere, varying his altitude to scan it from different angles. So far, however, all the readings were crazy. Either the equipment was completely out of whack or the UFO was actually made of light—very weird light, dense light that behaved like a solid, which made no sense. Not on Earth, anyway.

He wished Professor Iwamoto were available but he was away at a conference. The good doctor had co-founded the Science Patrol to investigate unusual and/or anomalous phenomena. The professor might not have been able to

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explain anything but Hayata would have felt better knowing he was aware of it.

Meanwhile, the UFO pilot seemed to be focused on three particular spots above the lake, flying from one to another repeatedly in a lopsided triangular pattern. Hayata scanned the areas, hoping to discover what the alien visitor was drawn to but found nothing other than mud, rocks, lichen, and fish.

Hayata shifted to what he hoped was a safe distance and flew over the water in the same pattern but there was no reaction from the UFO, no change in brightness, altitude, or speed. Either the pilot didn't see what he was doing as an overture to communication or didn't care. Hayata thought it was probably the latter. It seemed unlikely that a lifeform capable of space travel wouldn't know when another intelligent being was trying to communicate.

Backing off a little more, Hayata increased his altitude to give himself more room for evasive action, just in case the alien pilot stopped ignoring him. Was there a crew on board? he wondered. If so, they must have been small in stature and number. Unless the UFO were some kind of quantum vessel and the inside was bigger than the outside. No, that was even more unlikely, Hayata decided.

And while he was at it, how long was this thing going to hang around before the pilot went after whatever was down there? And how would he—or she, or they—do that? Send the theoretical crew down in a submarine? Or did they have some sophisticated device that would teleport things aboard?



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As if on cue, the UFO descended slowly into the lake, making the water churn and foam madly.

Hayata let out a surprised laugh. Okay, he hadn't seen that coming, although he probably should have. It made sense— any vessel that could travel safely through the vacuum of space would also be waterproof as well as airtight.

He heard the campers shouting in excitement on the exterior audio channel and pointed one of his outside cameras in their direction. Someone yelled at a guy named Tom to go get that fancy camera he'd insisted on bringing with him right now, dammit, or he was gonna miss the whole thing—

Which, sadly, Tom did, after tripping over something in the dark. By the time he got back, there was nothing to see but water bubbling up at the place where the UFO had gone down. Hayata felt sorry for him. He just hoped none of them got the bright idea to dive in after the thing.

He took the VTOL up a bit higher, looking for a blue glow in the water but there was nothing. Scans told him only that there was something big sitting on the muddy bottom and it had scared away all the fish. Time to call HQ and tell them to bring out one of the subs.

As Hayata reached for the cockpit comm, there was a flash of bright red in the windscreen directly in front of him. He had just enough time to register the thing as an enormous red sphere coming at him too quickly for evasive action.

Then everything went black.