

## CHAPTER ONE

**T**REEHUGGER RAN FOR HER life. She couldn't see where she was going; the eldritch dimension that she'd ended up inside didn't have much light and she had lost her flashlight at some point, though she didn't know when. Not that it would have helped her. She had caught a glimpse of the *thing* in the tree trunk—a brief glimpse of dead red eyes, undulating tentacles, a smoke-like substance rising from what may or may not have been its nostrils—and she had known, deep in her heart, that she needed to *run* and never, ever look back.

The problem, of course, was that Treehugger had no idea where she was going, but that didn't matter to her. She just ran and ran as fast as she could. She was a pretty fast runner; not as fast as Bolt or White, of course, due to her lack of super speed, but she had run track when she had been in school and so she was in pretty good shape. Even so, Treehugger had the feeling that the *thing* was right behind her the whole time, even though she couldn't hear footsteps behind her. It was possible that the thing was not chasing her—it didn't seem to have legs or anything else it could use to walk—but there were all kinds of strange things in this place, things that loved to feast on human blood and dreams, and so it was entirely possible that her earlier scream had drawn the attention of something even worse than that thing in the tree trunk. Or maybe the oppressive air of this dimension had finally caused Treehugger's mind to snap.

Regardless, Treehugger just ran. She ran until her legs started screaming in protest, ran until her lungs nearly burst, and she would have kept running even if her legs fell off and her lungs exploded, but at that moment she tripped over something on the ground and fell flat on her face. The impact of the fall made her senses go crazy, but she sensed something evil nearby and she immediately jumped back to her feet. She was just about to continue running, but then she realized that the evil presence she sensed was nearly upon her.

That was when Treehugger noticed something nearby, an outline in the shadows that looked like a set of large boulders. There was a gap between them that she thought she could slip between; indeed, the boulders looked like a good place to hide. Because Treehugger didn't think she could outrun the presence, she dashed over to the boulders and hid between them. She fell on her behind, her back against the boulder, and started breathing hard, but quietly, because she didn't want the evil presence or the thing or whatever it was to find her. She pulled her legs up to her chest, her heart beating like crazy as she sat very, very still.

A second later, something like a powerful wind blew through. But it wasn't a normal wind; it felt like an evil intelligence, like the sweeping sensors of a drone searching for its next target. Treehugger had never felt anything quite like it, but that described a lot of the things that Treehugger had encountered in this place. She nonetheless kept her head down and her body still, expecting any second now to be discovered by the intelligence and to suffer whatever gruesome fate it had planned for her.

A few tense seconds later, however, the intelligence passed her over and the wind went with it. But Treehugger still didn't move for at least a minute; she wanted to make sure that the intelligence was not going to come back or trick her. But it soon became clear that the intelligence was gone, so Treehugger raised her head and leaned back against the boulder, breathing in and out rapidly.

Now that she had a few moments to sit there and think, the adrenaline that had been pumping through Treehugger's veins was starting to recede. Tears of stress and pain began to appear at the corners of Treehugger's eyes. She wiped them away, but they were leaking out anyway. Treehugger had always been one of the more sensitive members of the team, which made her wonder how she

had managed to retain her composure so far. She supposed that she just hadn't had any time to think about it since arriving in this hostile environment.

*But I don't think I will last much longer, Treehugger thought with a snuffle. I'm all alone in this wretched dimension. All of my friends are a universe away. I would be happy to see even White Lightning now.*

Treehugger glanced at her suit-up watch. As always, it showed a 'NO SIGNAL' message. That was not surprising. The suit-up watch was a marvelous invention, but as far as Treehugger knew, its inventor, the deceased superhero Genius, had never managed to build a device capable of inter-dimensional communication. That meant that she couldn't call for help, nor could the others track her via suit-up watch or earcom.

*I'm going to be stuck here forever, Treehugger thought. I'll probably die here, too. Even if the monsters in this dimension don't kill me, I'll probably die of starvation or thirst eventually. I haven't found any food or water in this place, and I don't think such concepts even exist in this dimension. Why, oh why, did I go to the opening of the school? I should have just stayed home on Hero Island. At least then I would have avoided all of this madness.*

Treehugger suddenly felt exhausted. She yawned and closed her eyes. She knew it was dangerous to sleep here, but she was so tired from the events of the past day or so that she needed to sleep more than anything. Besides, the boulders would keep her hidden for a while. She would just doze off for a little while and then resume her search for a way back home after she woke up again.

Instead of sleeping, however, Treehugger found herself instead starting to reflect on how she got to this point. It had only been hours ago that Treehugger had been on Earth with her friends ... or maybe it had been years. Time didn't seem to operate in this place the same way it did on Earth, no doubt due to the lack of a sun, although there was that blood red moon Treehugger had caught a momentary glimpse of earlier ...

No. Treehugger couldn't think of that moon. Otherwise she might lose what little hold on her sanity that she had left.

*Maybe the way back home will be revealed to me if I reflect on how I got here, Treehugger thought. Even if it doesn't, it might help me go to sleep faster and get a little rest.*

So Treehugger returned to her memories, back to a nice, sunny day, a day that started out like any other, but would end very differently indeed ...