

25 Years Later

*A tale of the Legion of Super-Heroes
by David Meadows*

Rokk Krynn always snapped fully awake instantly, an old habit of his from the days when he might be called to duty at any hour of the day or night. But there was no one on monitor-board duty to sound an alarm tonight, or any night for the last 25 years, and he wasn't sure what had woken him. The bedroom was still in darkness, and silent. Lydda's regular breathing next to him told him that she was still fast asleep. He didn't need to turn his head to look at the glowing red digits of the clock beside the bed; the shape of the display's magnetic field told him it was 3am.

Rokk lay still for a few seconds, but knew he wasn't going to fall back to sleep now he was alert. He couldn't shake the feeling that something had caused him to wake, even though the whole apartment was still and there had been no alerts from the state-of-the-art security system. Carefully, so as not to wake his wife, he swung his legs out of bed and wriggled his feet into his slippers, fumbling for the dressing gown he had dropped somewhere on the floor. As he walked across the dark bedroom, the door slid silently open ahead of him.

The artificial-log fire glowed dimly in the living room's retro fireplace, not enough to fully illuminate the spacious room, but enough to show that a figure was sitting in Rokk's favourite upholstered armchair, facing the ruddy glow. Rokk tensed, his eyes fixed on the figure while a mental command closed the bedroom door behind him, keeping Lydda safe from whatever threat the intruder might pose. Then despite his tension he smiled, realising that in the darkness his wife was much better equipped to fight intruders than he was.

The intruder started to turn, and Rokk levitated a metal lamp stand, ready to hurl it at the first sign of a weapon. Then the light from the fire brought the intruder's profile into sharp relief, a profile Rokk couldn't fail to recognise. He released his breath and lowered the lamp, turning it on at the same time.

"Cham?" he said, completely dumfounded. His old friend Reep Daggles smiled up at him from the armchair.

They had kept in touch for the first few years after the Legion disbanded, but finding Chameleon Boy sitting here in his living room in Metropolis in the middle of the night, after all this time, was slightly surreal, as if he were still asleep and dreaming.

"Rokk. It's been a while. You might want to upgrade the apartment security."

"Pffft. As if anything on the market could keep you out. What are you doing here? Is it..."
Do I want the answer to be yes? "Is it Legion business?" Oh, please let the answer be yes.

Reep's smile got even wider.

"If it was, I wouldn't come to you. Look at you, after 25 years as a civilian you've gone soft."

"Hey!" Rokk protested, self-consciously tightening the sash of his robe. "I still hit the gym most days. But, you know," he admitted sheepishly, "Teaching history at Metropolis U is a pretty sedentary occupation."

"I'm just kidding, Rokk. The years have been kind to you." Reep hadn't changed at all as far as Rokk could see. Which was both understandable and slightly ironic, Rokk thought.

"But no, it's nothing like that. They still don't need us."

Rokk winced. Even after 25 years, it still hurt. But he had to admit that Reep was right. The United Planets were currently experiencing what could almost be called a utopian phase. Peace treaties with neighbouring empires were holding, and even internal troubles had decreased to levels the regular authorities could deal with comfortably. Rokk couldn't remember the last time an honest-to-gosh super-villain had made the nightly news.

Reep glanced at the clock and stood. "Come on, there isn't much time for small talk."

"Where are we going?" asked Rokk, following his old friend to the apartment door without really thinking about what he was doing.

"The elevator. The roof."

"Uh. Right. No. Wait. What is this? An emergency? The Legion is needed again, isn't it?"

Reep stopped and faced him. "No, this isn't about the Legion. This is about your son."

Rokk threw a panicked look towards the door of his son's bedroom. It appeared securely closed. He stepped towards it, raising his voice to shout.

"Lyle?"

Reep grabbed his arm.

"Shhh! You don't want to wake Lydda. Lyle isn't there."

"What?"

"Shhh! He's on the roof. Come on, we don't have that much time so I'll explain on the way."

Brimming with a million questions, Rokk followed Reep. Almost unconsciously, he picked up a handful of small metal trinkets from a table as he passed, and dropped them in the pocket of his robe. Well, you never knew...

Reep walked briskly down the corridor towards the elevator bank, Rokk right at his shoulder. Despite the Durlan's urgency, Rokk didn't feel any sense of panic or worry from his old friend. This was growing more surreal by the moment.

"Talk to me, Cham. What's going on? If Lyle is in danger..."

"He's not. Or at least, not if he's as smart as I think he is. No, don't start panicking!"

Rokk was stabbing the elevator call button angrily. It occurred to him that it would be quicker to tear his way through the building wall and magnetically levitate them both to the roof, but Reep's calm demeanour suggested that whatever was going on wasn't worth blowing his security deposit on.

While they waited for the elevator, Reep continued talking.

"I knew something was up when I got reports of Laurel Gand..."

"Ok. Wait. Laurel... Gand?"

"Mon-El's daughter."

"Mon-El had a daughter? I didn't know." But why should he? He hadn't seen Mon or Shady for... probably 25 years. Last he heard, nobody had. They were effectively recluses, exploring far out beyond the limits of known space.

"Laurel Gand in UP space," Reep continued as if he hadn't been interrupted. "And on Colu."

"Ok, wait," said Rokk again. "Colu's been in seclusion for years. Nobody gets news from them. How did you know she..."

"Rokk, just because you spend all your time looking back at the past doesn't mean we all do. I still keep tabs on all of us."

Of course you do, Rokk thought.

The elevator arrived and they began ascending. Reep's measured tones speeded up as he rushed to finish his explanation.

"So, the UP has banned them of course, but there is one left, and Brainy had it. I don't know how she talked him into letting her take it... actually I can guess... but..."

"Take what?" asked Rokk in frustration. At that moment the elevator door slid open, he looked across the roof, and he saw it. "Oh..."

"That," said Reep, unnecessarily.

"...sprock," said Rokk.

A time bubble.

And standing facing it, and turning guiltily at the sound of his father's voice, was Lyle Krynn.

"Nass," said Lyle, pushing unruly black hair out of his eyes, and Rokk didn't even reprimand him for his language. He didn't say anything. He just gaped.

"Hi, Dad," said Lyle, offering an embarrassed smile.

"What do you think you're doing?" asked Rokk when he found his voice.

"Uh... we're just... it was..."

"It was my idea," came a voice from around the side of the time bubble. "Sorry, Uncle Rokk."

From around the bubble stepped Aven Ranzz, youngest child of Garth and Imra, only a couple of years older than Lyle but a head taller, and looking awkward and gangly next to the more powerfully-built younger boy.

Rokk had always liked Aven, and had especially admired the way he had coped with his "singlet" status on Winath, the planet of twins. When the Ranzz's had visited Earth last year, he had formed an instant friendship with Lyle, and Imra confided in Rokk that Aven was often starved of companionship back home. His older brothers were adults already and striking out on their own, and he was effectively an only child on a planet where only children simply didn't happen. It was this conversation which led to Rokk suggesting Lyle spend the next summer holidays on Winath, a proposal that Lyle had jumped at. In fact...

"You cooked this up between you last summer!" said Rokk accusingly. On his return to Earth, Lyle had been acting particularly smug and gleeful, as if he had some secret he couldn't share with the adults. Lydda had taken a guess at what it was, but then Lydda had always been a romantic, and this time it seemed that her instincts were wrong.

"But it's not Aven's fault," said Lyle loyally. "We thought it up together." A look passed between the two teenagers. Well, maybe Lydda wasn't so wrong after all.

"I'm not interested in blame, I'm interested in how you got a time bubble and *what the sprock you intend to do with it!*"

"I got it for them. For us."

A strikingly beautiful, raven-haired, blue-skinned teenage girl floated gently down towards the roof, a blue cape billowing behind her in the wind.

"Laurel Gand, sir," she said respectfully. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mr Krynn."

"And as for what we're doing with it..." began Lyle.

"...Isn't it obvious?" asked Aven.

Oh, grife, they're finishing each other's sentences. I might laugh if I wasn't so angry.

Rokk heard Reep stifling a laugh, which didn't help. "I'll have words with you later," he muttered. He fixed a stern "dad" expression on his face and stepped forward in what he hoped was an authoritative way, realising the effect was ruined as the wind on the roof whipped his robe around his bare knees. *Well, I've worn worse*, he thought wryly. But the thought made him focus on what his son and Aven were actually wearing, Aven in red and white with a Saturn emblem on his chest was handing Lyle a round glass helmet and... oh, no...

"No. You are not doing this! And... is that my flight ring, young man?"

Lyle had the grace to look guilty. "You never wear it. And I would have put it back. And anyway, Aven's got his mother's..."

"Dad's is a bit loose," said Aven, blushing deeply enough to match his hair.

"Oh, sprock, Imra will kill me. They didn't agree to this, did they?"

"Weellll... they agreed to me visiting Lyle. Not Superboy. Oops."

"Not... Super... *what?*"

"Idiot," muttered Lyle.

"Come on, Rokk, don't tell me you hadn't worked that part out already," said Reep, not at all helpfully.

"Aven, that's not possible, even if I wanted to allow it. Timelines in the 20th and 21st are so mixed up, so chaotic... there isn't one simple past. The past your parents and I went to, that doesn't even exist any more, the Pocket Universe was destroyed, and now there are lots of conflicting histories, real and imaginary, any one of which may be the true timeline when you arrive. It's simply... it's simply not possible."

"We want to try, Uncle Rokk. Please."

"Please, Dad?"

Rokk found his thoughts wandering, slipping back years—and centuries—to the last time he had trodden the fields of old Earth, breathed the pure, unrecycled air of small-town America...

"Well... fine. One trip, and I'll come with you."

"You most certainly will not," murmured Reep, "if I have to restrain you myself."

"I will keep them safe, sir," said Laurel, who had been hanging back and looking uncomfortable during the confrontation. "You have my word." There was a gravitas in her voice and her posture that belied her years, and Rokk found himself wondering what an upbringing she must have had with Mon-El and Tasmia out beyond the galactic rim.

"We want to try for an Earth, not the Pocket Universe, an actual Earth, in which the Superboy you knew didn't die but lived to become Superman. He gave up his powers when his secret identity was discovered, and lived under a new name, married to Lois Lane. They had a son, Jonathan..."

"That's an imaginary story."

"Dad... aren't they all?"

"He's quoting your own thesis," said Reep. "Every possible past and future is equally real or imaginary, until you interact with it. Your boy's done his homework."

"Not helping, Cham," Rokk snapped. "Can any of you even pilot a time bubble? Do you have any idea how complex it is to set accurate co-ordinates, even when you only have a single universe to worry about?"

"We've, uh, got somebody to handle that for us," said Lyle.

“Are you guys ready?” yelled a girl’s voice from within the bubble. “I’m about ready to start chewing the seats in here, Cosmic Boy!” A teenage girl’s head stuck out of the hatch, blinked at Rokk, and with a squeak of “Uh-oh!” rapidly withdrew.

“Was that...?” asked Rokk.

“Calorie Princess,” mumbled Lyle uncomfortably. “We weren’t going to use code names, but she...” he trailed off in embarrassment.

“Can this get any worse?”

“We’ve been rumbled,” shouted the girl from within the time bubble. “Rapid exit! Lay in the course to the 20th century, Brainiac 6!”

Braini...

Yes, it can get worse.

Lyle, Aven and Laurel were backing towards the bubble, as a mounting hum told Rokk it was ready to engage its time drive.

“Back here as soon as you can, ok?” said Rokk.

“Yes, sir.”

“Yes, Uncle Rokk.”

“Love you, Dad!”

Then they were inside, and there was a burst of rainbow colour, and Rokk and Reep were alone on the roof.

“Oh, sprock. Lydda’s going to kill me. Fourteen, Cham, he’s only fourteen.”

“And how old were you when you made your first time journey?”

“That’s not the point! We were...”

“You were a lot less prepared than they were, and a lot more naïve. You had to make it up as you went along, they’ve been taught by the best in the business since they were old enough to walk.

“They planned this all by themselves, Rokk. They made it happen. And they did it without R.J. Brande’s fortune backing them. You should be proud of your son.”

Rokk gazed into space.

“I am, Cham. I am. But... oh, sprock... Brainiac Six?”

Not the end...